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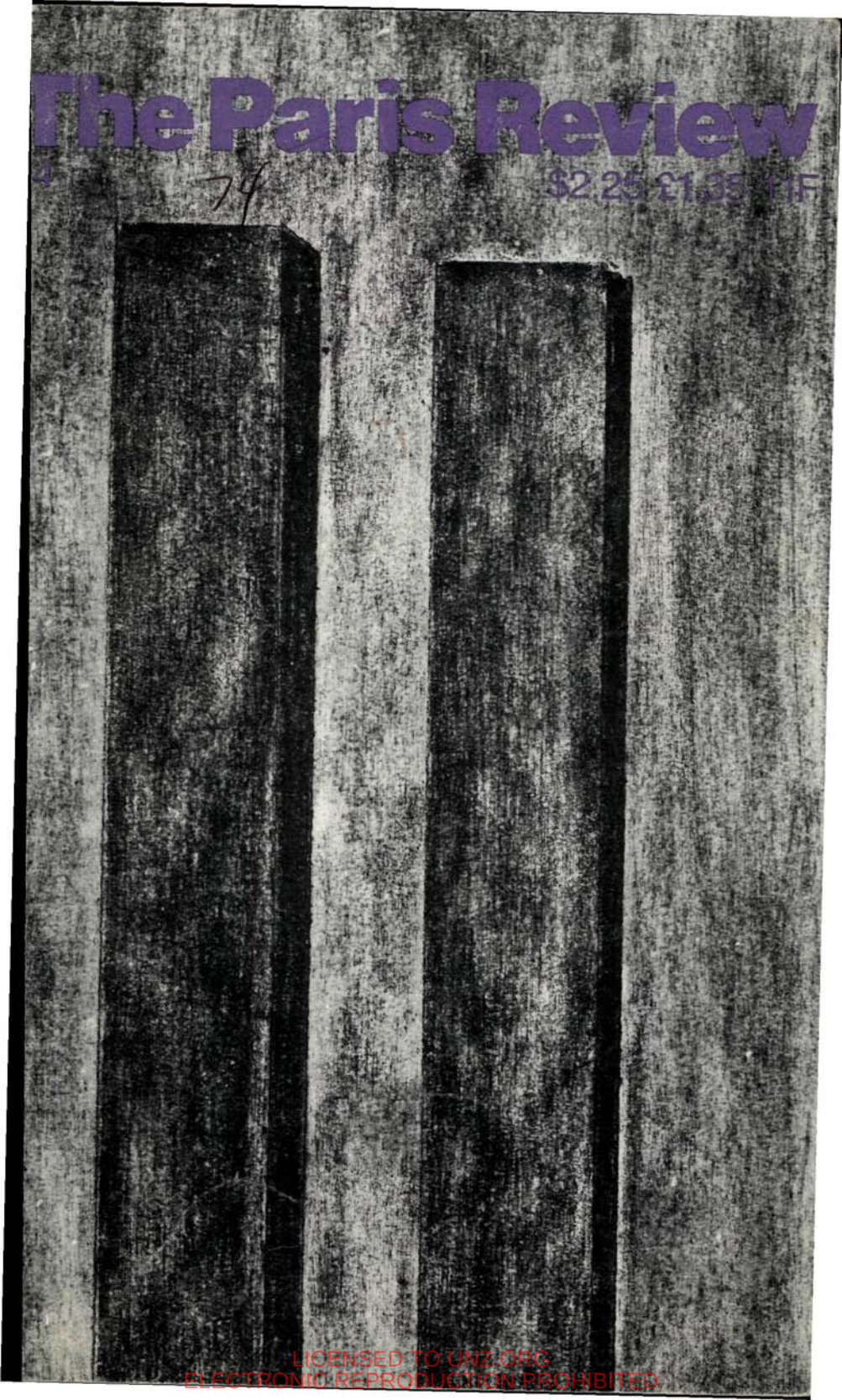

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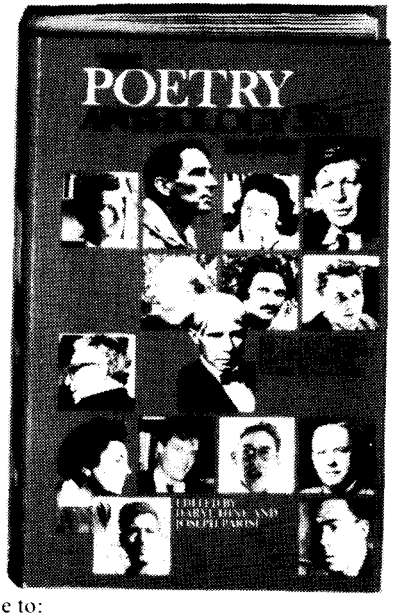

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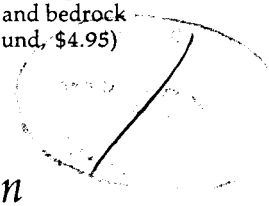

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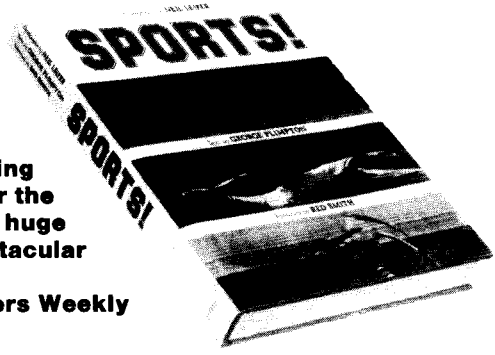

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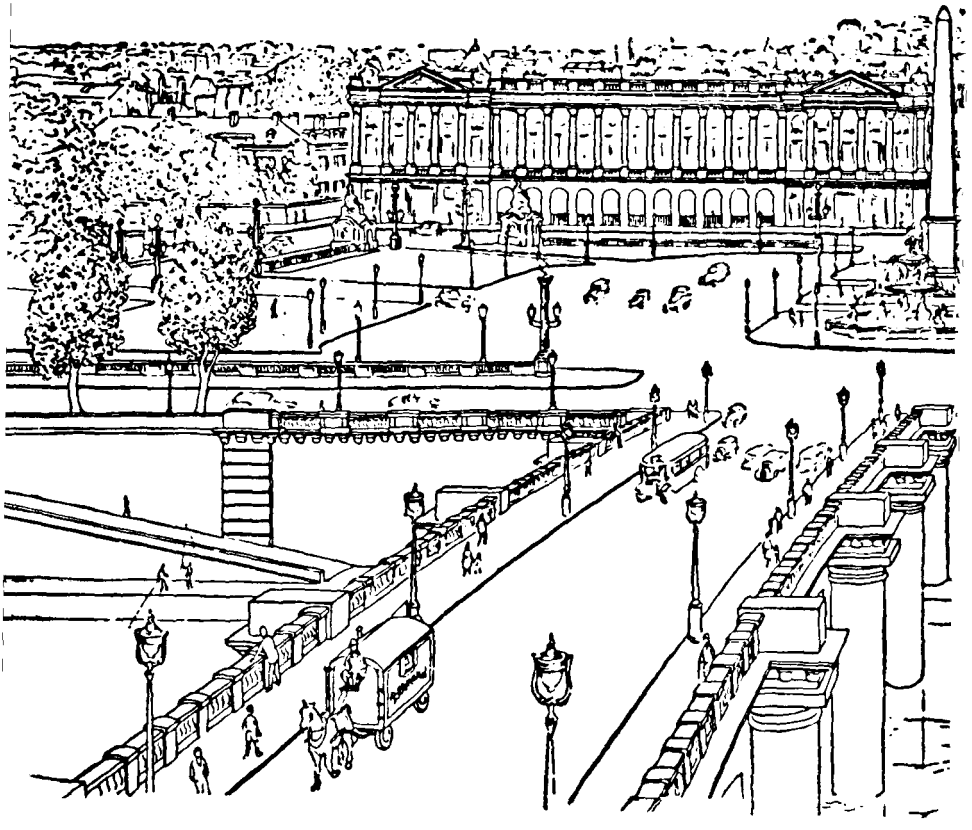

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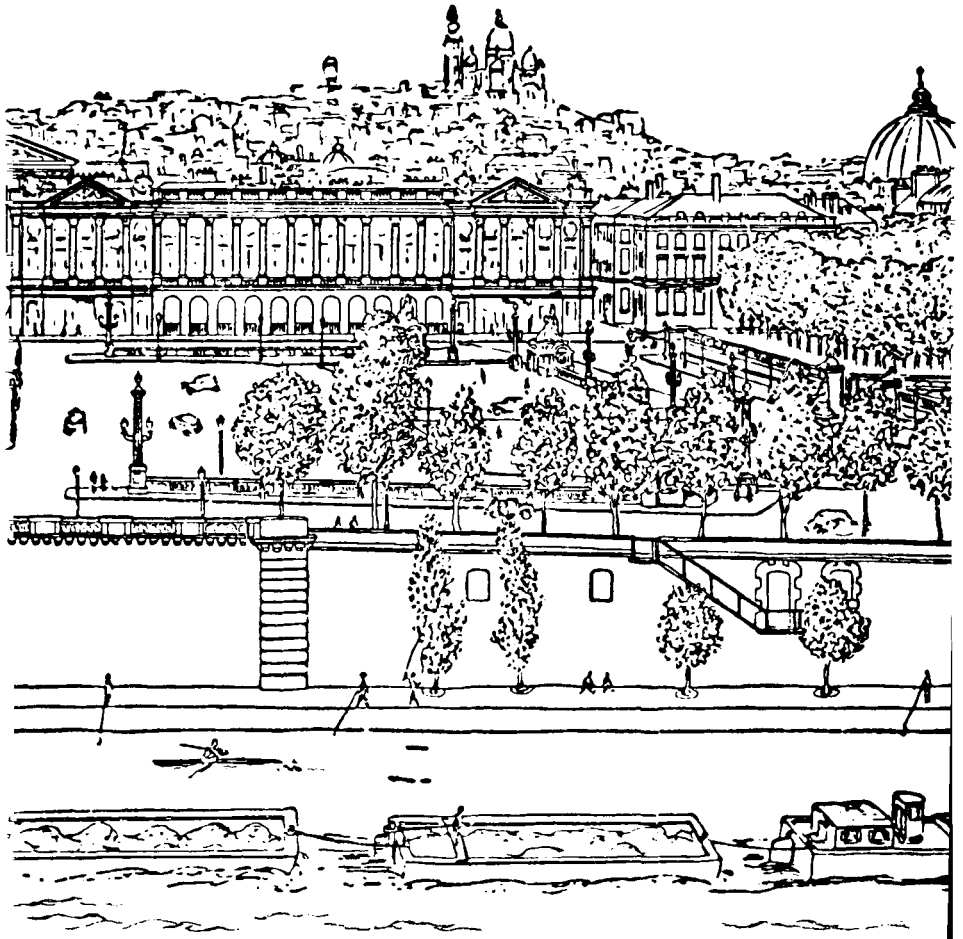

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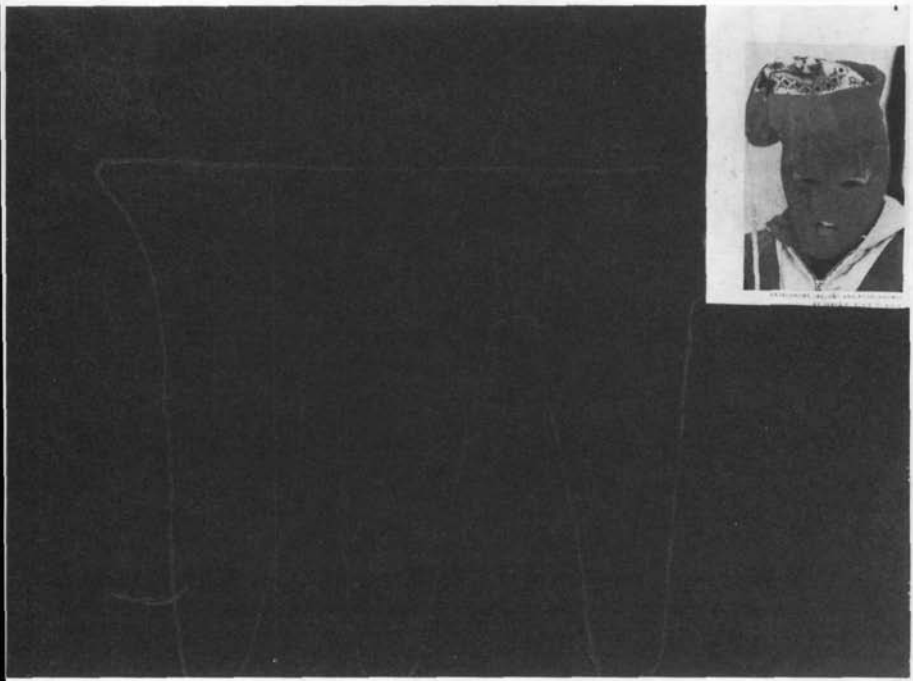

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The President

Eugene K. Garber

In the upper berth was a woman who began at about eight o'clock to weep softly. At first Mary did not find this troublesome. In fact, the weeping, which never verged on the hysterical or distraught, was rather soothing in its pure liquid sorrow. She went on reading her novel, *The President*, and listening to the counterpoint of clacking wheels and small weeping. But after three-quarters of an hour or so the sound began to disturb her—not because it in any way changed its quality but because its sheer duration threw its nature into doubt. It occurred to Mary that the weeper was incontinent or maybe even demented. Outside, on the Wyoming show, the light from the various uncurtained Pullman windows whizzed along like sheets of printed matter speeding through a process of complex collation.

At nine o'clock Mary summoned the conductor, paid the additional surcharge for the empty roomette in the next car, dressed and moved. She gave a handsome tip to the black porter who transferred her baggage and made down her bed.

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Nevertheless his unctuous silence irritated her. "I wonder what's the matter with her?" she said.

"Who, Mam?"

She pretended to be surprised that the porter answered. "I was just thinking out loud," she said. It was at that moment she folded precisely into his pink palm a five dollar bill with its stern dark face of Lincoln. And because she enjoyed such tidbits of fortuitous symbolism, she touched his hand a moment longer than necessary and smiled at him enigmatically. But the black only closed his hand, gave a spuriously obsequious thank-you, and disappeared. When he was gone, the door closed behind him, she laughed aloud. Poor man. How many white ladies of delicate appetite had pressed for his service with bills and smiles?

Mary lay down in her bed and resumed her novel. But she did not undress, perhaps because she had an intuition of coming restlessness. At any rate, about ten she got up and went with her novel back to the club car. She did not pass the berth of the weeper, but through a different sleeping car, all its berths enclosed in swaying black curtains, like some Italian mortuary place, the exact function of which she could not say. In the club car she found only a middle-aged married couple and the black bartender, not, of course, the same black who had helped her to her new roomette. She ordered a scotch, served rather elegantly by the black, she thought, coming with the towel over his forearm, giving the cap of the miniature a precise twist, and letting the amber fluid fall slowly over the ice with a deliberate languorousness. She paid and sipped. The middle-aged man looked at her. "Hello," she called across the narrow car full of the clatter of the wheels.

"Hello," said the man.

The woman smiled. "We've been waiting for you."

"For me?"

The man said, "We always meet somebody interesting in here."

"I'm afraid you're in for a disappointment this time."

"Don't be modest," said the woman. "Come over and sit with us."

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Mary picked up her drink and her book and joined the couple. She sat beside the woman, but she could see the man, too, because of the curve of the booth. On the window behind the man's head long tentacle-like streaks of water edged toward the rear of the train. "It must be snowing out," said Mary.

"It is," said the woman. "I see you're reading *The President.*"

"Me and everybody else."

"Not my husband. He won't read it."

The man smiled, as though to assure Mary that there was no animus in his decision. "How are you liking it?"

"Love it. I'm all but done—only a few pages of the epilogue left. The president is in disgrace and all his minions scattered."

"What part did you like best?" asked the man.

"I liked the long flashback to the time when the president played Othello in college."

The man wrinkled his brow. "I never heard that."

"Something the author made up," said the woman disapprovingly. "But it is effective," she conceded.

"Terrific, I think." Mary looked over to the man. "The last night of the play the president had a high fever, but he insisted on going on with his performance anyway. In the final scene he was sweating profusely. The pigment began to melt off his face, but he went on. Then after he had smothered Desdemona, he picked her up lovingly. But melted wax from a candle burning beside the bed had stuck to the hair of the girl who played Desdemona so that when he picked her up, the candle holder trailed along and the flame leaped up toward her head. But the president saw this. Still holding her on one arm, he squeezed out the flame against the bare flesh of his free hand. And the girl was heroic too. She smelled the odor of burning hair and scorched flesh but never whimpered, never even opened her eyes. So the play went on although the president's face was streaked and his hand seared. The audience applauded through four curtain calls."

The man nodded. "The president could do that all right."

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Mary frowned. "Did you know the president?"

"I knew him. I was his administrative assistant." The woman seconded her husband's statement smiling and nodding emphatically.

"No kidding?"

"No kidding."

"Wow. There're a thousand questions I'd like to ask you, like who was the woman in real life and who was the boy. . ."

"Don't ask," said the man harshly.

The woman laid her hand gently on Mary's arm. "He doesn't like to talk about it."

"I can understand that," said Mary, but reluctantly.

The man pointed at the book. "All he did was come around after it was over and talk to the ones that hated the president."

Now the woman laid her other hand on her husband's arm as though she intended to function as a mollifying connection. Mary said, "I'm sure there's lots of distortion, as always in a *roman à clef.* But the president comes off very strong."

The man nodded begrudgingly. When he spoke again his voice was less sharp. "My wife told me how he hoked up the ending. And I can assure you that the agents did not slip up on the mansion and find him in bed with the boy that last night. And the woman did not tip them off secretly. He himself told her to call. The boy was already dead by his own hand—and not running out into the night, like in the book, to hurl himself off the cliff into the sea."

The woman lifted her hands from their arms, satisfied apparently that a bitter argument was not going to ensue. Curiously, however, Mary doubted that the man had not read the novel. In fact, she doubted everything the couple said. There were no characters like them in the novel. But at that moment, almost as though she had read Mary's mind, the woman said, "Fortunately he skipped us—or we would have come in for it like the vice president and his wife, because we were on the president's side, too, right up to the end."

"And beyond," said the man. The woman nodded.

Now what had seemed at first to Mary a fascinating, even a

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fantastic encounter began to be uncomfortably problematical. She found she had no appetite for sorting out fact and fiction. She preferred the book as it was, without these dubious and unimaginative correctives. She drank the last of her drink with the idea of excusing herself, but before she could say anything, the man raised his hand and called to the bartender, "Three more of the same, please." He turned to Mary. "Unless I miss my guess, young lady, you'll have the opportunity to meet one of the main characters of the novel very shortly." The woman nodded confirmation again.

"Really?" said Mary. "Who?"

"The woman herself, Alice."

"Charlotte in the novel," the woman said.

"No kidding?"

"No kidding."

"Where is she?"

The man tilted his head back toward the window. "She gets on at a whistle stop called Windome, not even a town. She goes skiing up in Montana and comes back down to Windome by bus."

"Skiing?" said Mary. "From the novel I wouldn't have guessed she was a ski buff, or any other kind of athletic buff for that matter."

The bartender came and poured the drinks. The man paid and said, "Then that's another defamation of character on the novelist's part. Alice was a super tennis player. That's where the president met her, in fact, on the country club courts."

Mary, of course, found herself in sympathy with the novelist's portrait of Alice as a sort of demimondaine. The man's version of the characters and events was a bore. It wasn't even as convincing as the sometimes cautious, sometimes lurid newspaper accounts, which in turn seemed altogether unauthentic compared to the novel. So she said, with a certain perverse insistence in her voice, "In the novel the board forces him to marry Charlotte because the word is circulating that he's a homosexual. Of course the board doesn't take into account the possibility of Steven coming to live with his mother

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in the mansion. And, as you know, it's from that that the tragedy derives."

The man shrugged. "Believe what you want to. Novelists can write anything and get away with it. You can't sue. First amendment and all that."

Because the man did not explicitly deny the president's homosexuality, Mary knew that it was true. She slyly pressed her advantage. "Why don't the two of you write a kind of counter exposé and set the record straight?" She made the suggestion with her brightest naïveté so that the couple could not guess the true irony in her intentions. But neither of them answered. It was as though they hadn't heard. So her clever dart fell harmlessly. Something, a little lighted shack perhaps, whizzed by outside the window. "We're close," said the man.

Suddenly the woman laid her hand on Mary's arm again and gave a motherly little squeeze. "Why did you move from your berth, dear?"

"How did you know I moved from my berth?"

"We saw the porter with your things."

"Oh. Well, there was a woman in the upper berth crying. It started getting on my nerves."

The woman patted Mary's arm sympathetically. "I don't blame you."

"Do you know who she is?"

"How would I know, dear?"

"Well, you ride the train often. You know where people get on."

"Just Alice, dear."

The man snickered. "That's what comes of reading novels."

"What?"

"The idea that there's a regular who gets on and cries in an upper berth."

"Excuse me," said Mary sharply. "I'm going to the ladies' room."

"You don't have to go back through the car, dear. There's one on the other side of the bar."

The woman was right. In fact, the bartender nodded her on.

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And she went in, despite the fact that there was no marking on the door—no word, not even one of those silly silhouettes in a skirt. She herself was wearing pants. She smiled. Her irritation with the couple and their dogged fidelity to the mundane facts of the president's case began to evaporate. The whole business amused her—the president as swinger, the unisex toilet, the whole world gone AC-DC. The train came to a sudden jerky stop that would have pitched her head against the steel-plated wall if she hadn't held out her hands. Pity the poor sleepers.

When Mary came back into the club car, the woman Alice was there, sitting in the booth with the couple. The man was in the middle. They were squeezed together so that there was still room for Mary, just barely, to sit beside the wife, who was patting the cushion. "Sit down, dear, and meet Alice."

"I told you she would get on at Windome," said the man, but not aggressively, as Mary might have feared. Rather, he was like a boy delighted to be able to keep an improbable promise. Mary sat down, nodding to the woman Alice, who faced her from the opposite end of the semi-circular booth. So powerful was Alice's presence and so strong was Mary's response to it that the couple seemed squeezed back against the cushion by the pressure of this attraction.

To begin with, Alice was very large. Mary, who was five foot nine herself, guessed that she stood over six feet. Her hand entirely circled the drink glass which the bartender had brought during Mary's absence. The thumb and middle finger touched. The nails were clipped short, which squared with the man's account of her athletic prowess, and yet the hand was somehow remarkably sensuous. Perhaps it was the thick padding of flesh on the fingers. "What," said Alice, "have you billed me as to this poor child?" The train began to move forward again.

Mary feared the weight of that word *child* and was determined to get out from under it, but in the meanwhile the wife was saying, "She's reading *The President.*"

"Ah," said Alice, as if that explained everything. In the curls of her black hair, drops of melted snow shone like the diamonds of the infamously bedizened madonnas of Spain.

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Fortunately, thought Mary, those would soon disappear. She said, "We have been discovering, or at least I have, that the novel version is often more compelling than the facts." She glanced from Alice to the couple to see if they would contradict her. But even more than before, they were hardly there, pressed back against the cushions under the window like frightened supernumeraries. "Would you have said so?" she asked Alice.

"Would I have said so? Well. . ." Alice's mouth remained open, meditatively. The lips siezed Mary's attention and held it. They were puffy and cracked—no doubt from exposure to the frozen air. But to Mary it seemed that the cause of the lesions must be internal: an excess of sensuosity, a hot erosive saliva in the mouth. "Do you ski?" said the lips. Mary was mildly offended. She had been hoping that in answer to her question the lips would mold a round and revealing statement about the essential truth of the novel, but here were the lips drawn disappointingly across the cold and narrow *ski*.

"No, I don't ski," said Mary. "Why do you?"

"It combines many sensations—free flight, falling, diving —especially in powder snow when you have control in all three dimensions."

How curious, Mary was thinking, to be looking at a person's lips while she talked, instead of looking at her eyes. Nevertheless, her concentration on the lips was rewarded with an interesting discovery: a tiny moment of uncertainty before every utterance. That is, the lips did not fall easily upon each syllable but groped momentarily, mouthing the air. "Does it pain you to speak?" she said.

"Of the events in the novel? No, not really, if you let me answer you in my own roundabout way."

"No, I mean does it pain you to speak at all?"

Alice knitted her brows, then brightened and said, "No. I have an anesthetic salve." That reply, failing to touch the curious searching motion of the lips, answered only the most obvious and least important part of Mary's question, but she didn't know how to pursue it further. "You were speaking of skiing."

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"Yes. You tip over the crest of the slope, just pull your poles up or else give a great thrust. That doesn't matter. What matters is the going down, the speed, until you are entirely out of yourself. Can you imagine that?" Alice was speaking slowly, but Mary knew that it was not because the images came slowly. In fact, she could see them crowded behind her dark eyes, poised like avid skiers at the top of a slope. The slowness was in her lips, the antithetical torrid zone of her being. "Can you?"

"Yes. Like a swing."

"No. Because in a swing all your weight pushes down uncomfortably at the bottom of the arc. Skiing is all weightlessness."

"I can imagine it. Go on."

"When you are out of yourself you are free of all space and time. You can embrace any other person of any time. You can almost become that person."

"Like another who has fallen before.?"

"Yes. Like another who has fallen before."

Mary turned sharply to the man. "You said Steven hadn't fallen." But the man didn't hear, or pretended not to hear, leaning fearfully against the window, on the outside of which the splayed fingers of melted snow continued to edge toward the rear of the train.

The woman Alice paid no attention to the accusatory words that Mary flung at the man. Neither did the wife. So Mary said, "Go on. You said you would answer, in your own roundabout way, my question: which is true, the novel or the facts?" Alice gave her a dark and almost pitying look. Mary said, "Don't tell me it's a bad question. You have to make up your mind about the significance of the events. You can't always be tipping over a slope, sliding into Steven's body."

"Phil in real life," said the wife.

Alice picked up her glass and drank. Mary drank with her. As she did, she felt, without any volition on her part, the exact pain the scotch caused in the lesions in Alice's lips—how the burning was precisely striated, how it radiated inward burning mouth and tongue.

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"It's not gliding into Steven's body," said Alice. "it's finding the body, plucking it out of space and lifting it up."

Mary nodded. "I can imagine that." And it was true, she could—the slow sharp-eyed glide tipping suddenly into a whistling dive, the lost soul below, a hopeless powdery thing to be plucked maternally out of the snow. She cocked her head. "What about the not-dead, the one in disgrace, still walking the earth? Can you pluck him up?"

The woman Alice shook her head mournfully.

"Then your skiing isn't much good," said Mary flatly. "In fact, it's tainted with necrophilia. But life is for the living."

Alice didn't take up the challenge. Instead, she smiled and said, "We went through all the ages of love just as if we had started as children. At first we loved to distraction. We looked into each other's face endlessly. Perhaps we thought if we studied each other long enough and hard enough we would become inseparable. Then came the fierce time of harrowing pain when we learned that we were two. Of course we wouldn't accept it at first and tried to break through the veil of identity, the veil of flesh itself. But finally we did accept it. Then we were quiet and had our round time, like a red apple that spins slowly on its stem in the sun." Alice stopped and smiled.

"But there was a worm in the apple."

Alice said nothing to that.

"All right," said Mary, "what came after the apple?"

"The winter, inevitably."

"No," said Mary, "not inevitably, in the regular seasonal way. Because the winter was always in your heart. You were always a skier, a winter wife."

The woman Alice smiled. "You don't know what you're saying, child. The wife of winter has a heart hotter than the core of the earth. If I were the wife of winter I would burn my way to his heart and bring him back. That would be all there is to it. But I am only Alice and I ski because it's winter. But don't think that I ski only for Steven, I ski for the president, too. I have even touched his face and grasped at it, but the flesh slips away."

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Mary looked at Alice's hands. "Because your nails are gone. They are cut back like a man's." She breathed deeply and plunged on. "There's a palsy of hatred in your hands that keeps you from grasping him."

Alice shook her head. "There was once a thing that kept me from grasping him, but I have overcome it."

"What was it?"

Alice leaned slowly across the table, and Mary leaned to meet her. In essence she already knew what the lips were going to say, puffy, moist, the lesions shining with a terrible brightness. "It was that he would come fresh from making love to my son and kiss me, and I couldn't stand the sweetness of it."

The two continued to gaze at one another for a long minute. At last they released each other and leaned back against the cushion. "And now you could?" said Mary softly. But she never got an answer to that question. For suddenly all the substance seemed to drain out of Alice. The swaying of the train whipped her head back and forth as though it were the head of a loosely strung puppet. The shine went out of her hair and eyes, and the strength out of her large hands. She stood, turned, and began to walk feebly forward toward the sleeper cars, concentrating intently on each step. The couple rose and followed her.

Behind her Mary heard the black bartender make a clatter of glasses, signal that it was time for her to go, too, so he could close up. But she didn't go. Because just then, for a brief instant, she saw the president standing in the snow outside lit by the flashing light of the window. He was waving forlornly. She leaped up, wrenched open the little glass box above the bartender's head, and pulled the emergency signal.

"Miss!" shouted the black, his eyes wide. But he didn't try to stop her. No doubt something in her ferocious intensity caused him to throw up his arms and cower. A moment later the train began to stop. The couplings ground and jerked horribly, the wheels screamed, and the cars shuddered violently as though any moment they might leap clear of the tracks and plunge out into the snow.

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When finally the train stopped and the horrible noises diminished to a low groaning, Mary picked herself up from the cushion and looked at the black, who was still leaning against the bar where he had been pinioned by the braking of the train. "Didn't you see him?"

The black stared at her balefully and shook his head. She dashed forward into the dark passageway between the club car and the adjacent sleeper. There she tried to open the door to the outside, first pushing at it and then pulling on the handle, which rode uselessly up and down in a curved slot. She was still wrestling with it when the conductor and the engineer came back. "What's going on?" shouted the engineer, shining a bright electric torch in her face.

"There's a man out there."

"Are you the one that pulled the signal?"

"Yes, of course!" Mary shouted impatiently.

"Why?"

"Why! Because there's a man out there! Get that thing out of my face and help me open this!"

A moment later the three of them—Mary, the engineer, and the conductor—were tramping through the snow toward the end of the club car and the bare tracks beyond. The engineer swept the rolling snow dunes with his torch. "We're coming!" shouted Mary, plunging ahead. "Hurry!" she said to the two men behind without turning. "Back this way. It must have taken you a mile to stop." The conductor paused momentarily to speak to the bartender, who had stepped out onto the tiny vestibule of the club car. "What was it, Sam?"

"Ain't nothing out there 'less it's a coyote or a owl she saw." His speech made a cloud of mist.

"Is she drunk?"

"Naw. Ain't had but two drinks. Talking back here to a man and his wife till just a minute ago."

Mary led the two men down the tracks. "Hello there!" the engineer hollered while he shined his light through a wide arc.

"There's nobody out here," said the conductor to the engineer, who nodded agreement, but Mary said, "Yes he is. He's

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probably fallen in the snow and needs help.''

The engineer wagged his head resignedly and followed after her, saying to the conductor, ''If some old bum freezes to death out here after we've stopped, I'll never hear the end of it.''

''What would an old bum be doing out here sixty miles from the middle of nowhere.?''

''How would I know? Got drunk and fell off a freight maybe.'' A minute later he said, ''Look, miss. Here's where I hit the brakes.'' He pointed the light down on the shiny tracks. ''If we don't see footprints or something within a hundred yards, we're going back.''

Mary turned and looked at him with fierce determination. There was no doubt in her mind that she had seen the president, but now she doubted that she would find him—because all conditions conspired against her searching. For one thing the inane voices of the engineer and the conductor deflated the air. It came into her lungs cold and spiritless. She could scarcely catch her breath. Also the wind-feathered snow bleeding off into the empty air was too thin for gliding.

''A hundred yards,'' said the engineer. ''That's it, miss.'' Her lips must have quivered because he added, ''Here, take this coat.'' She let him slip the gray garment over her shoulders.

They found nothing so they turned back. Mary didn't object. ''Sorry, miss,'' said the engineer.

The conductor said, ''I don't think we need to apologize for not digging somebody up for her. Earlier it was a weeping woman.''

''I don't know what you're talking about,'' said the engineer in a tone that made it clear he didn't want to know.

A moment later the conductor said fiercely, ''By God, it's cold out here!''

The engineer didn't say anything. Neither did Mary—not later, when the disturbed sleepers stuck their faces out of the black curtains and glowered and asked questions. ''False alarm,'' said the conductor with obvious disapproval. But Mary didn't say anything, not even thank-you to the engineer

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at the door of her roomette when she handed him his coat. She turned her back on the two men, slammed the door, and slid the lock in place with a loud click. That was too much for the conductor. He shouted from the other side, "Don't see anything, don't hear anything! Go to sleep!"

Mary undressed and got into her bunk bed. She was cold, cold to the bone. The train started with a jerk. The little reading light over her head flickered momentarily, reminding her that her novel was still back in the club car, on the floor no doubt, where the sudden braking of the train had thrown it. She held her fingers under the lamp, but the warmth they received was negligible so she turned it out and curled up under the covers, shivering. "I'm no better than the woman Alice," she said to herself. "Not even as good, if she was telling the truth that sometimes she skies down and touches him."

Whenever she shut her eyes she saw the president's sad maimed face harrowed by the hand of winter. So she kept her eyes open. She didn't want to see him. She didn't need to see him, because now she understood what the woman Alice had been trying to tell her, understood why she couldn't find him when the train stopped. There were always these great men—Othellos, presidents, pederasts—reaching into every corner of love, warming even the snowiest places, and in doing so consuming themselves. You couldn't save them. It was a mistake to try, because it was against nature. But you always found that out too late, after you had already made the attachment. And then you could never be satisfied with anybody else. You entered the husbandless dark of perpetual searching.

Over by the door of the roomette burned the little red night light—like a votive candle, Mary thought. Then she thought that she must have begun to weep tears, for from time to time the red bead of light would splay out over her eye and pulse hugely like some fiery presence in the heart of the night.

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Vicente Aleixandre was born in 1898 in Seville, where his grandfather was regional military commander. His father was an engineer. During most of his childhood the family lived in Málaga on the Mediterranean coast just southeast of Seville. In college, Aleixandre studied law and business administration and he went on to teach in the same fields. But an informal and hidden attention to literature grew quietly beneath the other more formal and public life.

When he was nineteen, Aleixandre spent the summer in a small town in the mountains where a friend gave him a book of poems by Rubén Darío. Until that time he had read widely, but mostly novels, not poetry. That summer, after discovering Darío, he read Antonio Machado and Juan Ramón Jiménez. And he began to write. But always in secret, as if it were just a pastime. He taught law; he was reading the Spanish mystics at the same time as, in his public life, he was helping to edit an economics review. This went on for eight years. Finally, when he was twenty-seven, he collapsed with an illness that forced him to abandon his job and spend two years inactive in the mountains. Almost immediately he began to publish poems and within three years his first book appeared.

He fell ill again several times during the 1930s (tuberculosis, kidney disease), including a long convalescence that isolated him during the Spanish Civil War. He is one of the few Spanish poets who was able both to survive the war and remain in Spain. (He has never been a political poet.) His first book after the war established him as a guiding force among Spain's younger poets, their link to the past.

Aleixandre was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1977. He is still writing, living on the outskirts of Madrid in the same house he has lived in for the last 50 years.

—Lewis Hyde

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Vicente Aleixandre Portfolio

From the Prologue to the Second Edition of

La Destruccion O El Amor

I have written before, at various times and places, of my glimpses into poets and poetry. I will only repeat that for me the poet, the honest-to-God poet, is always one who reveals. The poet is essentially the seer, the prophet. But his "prediction" is not a prediction of the future; it might well be of the past: it is timeless prophecy. He illumines, he aims light, shakes men, he commands an "open sesame," a word that, in some mysterious way, can show them their destiny.

The poet is a man who might be more than a man: because he is a poet besides. The poet is full of "wisdom," but he can't feel proud because it may not be his: an unknowable force, a spirit speaks through his mouth. With his two feet planted on the earth, a mighty current forms, gathering beneath his soles, streaming through his body to leap from his tongue. It is thus the earth itself, the deep earth, that flames from that furious body. But other times the poet has climbed to the heights, and with his brow set among the heavens he speaks with a voice of the planets, with cosmic resonance,

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while in his breast he feels the very breath of the stars.

The tiny ant, the blade of soft grass under his cheek when he rests, are not different from himself. And he understands them, overhears their secret sound, which can just be made out amid the roar of thunder.

I don't believe that the poet is defined, at bottom, by his labor as a gold or silversmith. The perfection of his work is a painstaking attention to craftsmanship, and his message is worth nothing if he offers men a rough or inadequate surface. But emptiness can never be redeemed by the patient toil of those who polish those sad metals.

Some poets—this is another matter, and not of expression, but rather of point of departure—are poets "of the few." They are artists (it makes no difference what stature) who address themselves to men by attending, so they say, to exquisite and narrow obsessions, to elegant trifles (what profound and delicate poems Mallarmé wrote to fans!); to distilled essences, expressive in miniature of our intricate civilization.

Other poets (again, stature makes no difference) address themselves to what is permanent in man. Not to the details that set us apart, but to the essence that brings us together. And while they see man caught up in his modern civilization, they also feel the pure nakedness radiating unchangeable from under his worn clothing. Love, sorrow, hatred and death are changeless. These poets are radical poets and they speak to what is primordial, to what is elemental in humanity. They cannot *feel* themselves to be poets of the few. I am one of these.

1944
Translated by David Prichard

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The Eagles

The earth locks up the truth about life
even though the blood tells moody lies
when, like the smooth afternoon sea,
it feels the eagles flapping freely overhead.

Their metal feathers,
their crushing claws,
that taste they have for love or death—
a longing to drink from eye sockets with an iron beak,
to kiss the outside of this world once and for all—
it flies up like desire,
like the clouds that never block the way,
like the glowing blue, a heart already out there
opening for all the world in its freedom.

The serene eagles
will never be boats,
they won't be dream or bird,
they won't be a box where sad memories lie forgotten,
where opals or emeralds are put away.

The sun that thickens in our eyes,
that gazes freely down at our eyes,
the sun is an undying bird, bully of the chests,
sinking its rage into them against a trapped body.

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The violent wings
that beat faces as if they were eclipses,
that split open veins of dead sapphire,
that section up the clotted blood,
these wings break the wind into a thousand pieces—
marble or impervious space—
where the clarity that flashes at night
is a dead hand, held back.

Eagles like deep valleys,
like high, high mountains,
they overthrow all royal things, dusty tree trunks,
the green ivy along our thighs
that pretends it's a vegetable tongue, almost alive.

The moment's coming when happiness will be a matter
of stripping the skin from human bodies,
when the gloating eye of the sky
will see the earth as nothing but blood turning in gyres.

Eagles of metal so incredibly resonant,
enraged harps with voices almost human
who sing the anger of being in love with hearts,
loving them, squeezing death out of them with their claws.

1932
Translated by Lewis Hyde

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Guitar Or Moon

A guitar like a moon.
Is it the moon or only its blood?
It's a tiny heart that has escaped
and goes over the woods trailing its blue, sleepless music.

A voice or its blood,
a passion or its terror,
a fish or a dry moon
that flops about at night, sprinkling the valleys.

Heavy hand or threatening anger.
Is the moon red or yellow?
No, it's not an eye turned bloodshot in its rage
to see the edges of the tiny earth.

Hand that searches through the sky for the same life,
that searches for the heartbeat of a bleeding sky,
that searches deep in the middle of the old planets
who banish the guitar that's lit up at night.

Grief, grief of a breast no one can quite describe,
when wild animals feel their hair bristling,
when they feel themselves soaked in the cold light
that hunts for their skins like a monstrous hand.

Translated by Lewis Hyde and David Unger

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The Hands

Look at your hand, how slowly it moves,
transparent, tangible, laid over with light,
beautiful, alive, almost human in the night.
With the moon's reflection, with the pain in a cheek,
with the vagueness of dreams
look at how it grows as you raise your arm,
senseless search through a lost darkness,
wing of light that moves across in silence
and feels that dark crypt with its flesh.

Your sorrow doesn't phosphoresce, it hasn't caught
the other wing's hot heartbeat.
A flying hand being chased: a pair.
Sweet, dark and faded, you cross back and forth.

You are the calling of lovers, the signals
that silently appeal to one another in the dark.
Sky with rubbed out stars, cool field
that gives itself to these noiseless wings.

Hands of lovers who have recently died,
hands full of life that fly after each other
and, when they collide and clasp, set
the momentary moon aflame over the world of men.

1944
Translated by Lewis Hyde

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We Feed On Shadow

Every bit of you, mysterious power that never explains
yourself.
You, force we sometimes feel with the thread of love.
There's the snag. That's what it is to feel a body,
a soul, to surround it and say: "Here it is." And slowly, very
slowly
and with pleasure we examine a truth that shows us nothing
but its inessentials:
here's the head and here's the breast, here's the waist and its
escape route,
and the sudden swamping and the flight, the two long
sweet legs
that appear to be forever flowing, finishing.
And for a moment we clutch that lump of life.
And then we've recognized the truth in our arms,
the desired body,
the overheard soul,
the soul we covet with such greed.

After that, where's the force of love? Where's the answer a
responsive God would have given us,
a God who wouldn't have denied himself to us, who
wouldn't have just
thrown us a body, a soul, to keep us quiet?
Just the way a dog with a scrap in its mouth will shut up
and won't let go,
that's like us, bloodied with the harsh splendor, full of it,
we clutch what a hand seems to have thrown us.
But where are you?, the only hand that could give
the supreme gift, the softness of your undying skin,
of your one truth, the only caress that might have kept us
quiet, panting, forever?

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We lift up our eyes from the edge of death. Table scraps,
crusts of bread, beatings, rags, life, death:
you pour it all out like a gift of compassion
like a shadow you've thrown to us, and an echo of the
splendor,
and we eat it.
We eat the shadow, we feed on the dream or its shadow,
and we quiet down.
And we even admire it: we sing. Its name is Love!

But once more the huge, damp eyes lift up. There isn't
any hand. Not even
the rustle of garments.
Only the long lamentation, or the tightly-held silence.
The silence that goes with us only
when—with the shadow fading in our teeth—we set out on
foot
again, full of hunger.

Translated by Lewis Hyde 1954

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After Love

As you lie there in the shadows of the room,
like the silence that remains after making love,
I, from the depths of my half-sleep, rise lightly toward
your tender, cooling borders that still sweetly exist.
And with my hand I stroke the delicate outer boundary of
your
withdrawn life,
I feel the hushed, musical truth of your body that only a
moment
ago sang like a disordered fire.
And your half-sleep allows the clay—which lost its lasting
form
in the act of love,
which leapt up like a hungry, ragged flame—
to turn itself back again into the true body that remakes
itself
in its enclosure.

Touching the warm edges of a lover's body—silky,
unhurt,
delicately naked—we know that her life will go on.
Love is a momentary destruction, a combustion that
threatens
the pure creature we love, the one who's wounded in our
fire.
But after we've pulled away from her destroyed flames
and looked at her, we see clearly the new, re-formed life,
the quiet, warm life that called to us from the sweet surface
of her body.

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Here is love's perfect vessel, filled
and overflowing with its serene and glistening golden blood.
Here are the breasts, the belly, her rounded thigh, her foot below
and her shoulders above, her neck like a soft new feather,
her cheek not scorched, not burnt, but frank with its new rosy flush,
and her brow where the daily thought of our love makes its home
and keeps watch with clear eyes.
And at the center, sealing her bright face which the yellow evening
warms without a fuss,
lies her mouth, torn, pure in the light.
Modest entry to the storehouse of fire!
With these fingers that are afraid and aware, I stroke your delicate skin
while, with my mouth, I begin again to cover your cooling hair.

1954
Translated by Lewis Hyde

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The Young and the Old

People walk by, young ones. There they go, one after another,
removed from the glorious evening that rubs them with its oil.
Like those old people
who move more slowly, harnessed
to the last ray of the sun in the west.
The old are well aware of the coolness of this rare evening.
The sun, thinned out, touches them and they take in
its mildness: it's a blessing—so few are left!—
and they move slowly along that clear path.

It is the early season's first flush of green.
The young river—more like the childhood of a nearby spring—
and the foliage about to break: gentle oaks,
a forest rising lightly toward the mountain pass.
So lightly! But the old no longer move to that rhythm.
And over there, the young, taking the lead, go past them
without seeing, they move on and don't look back.
The old folks watch them. They're steady,
these people who, at the far side of life,
at the edge of the end, stay suspended,
without falling, that way forever.
While the young shadows go past, so unstable, using themselves up,
driven by the thirst that one gust of air will satisfy.

1966
Translated by Lewis Hyde

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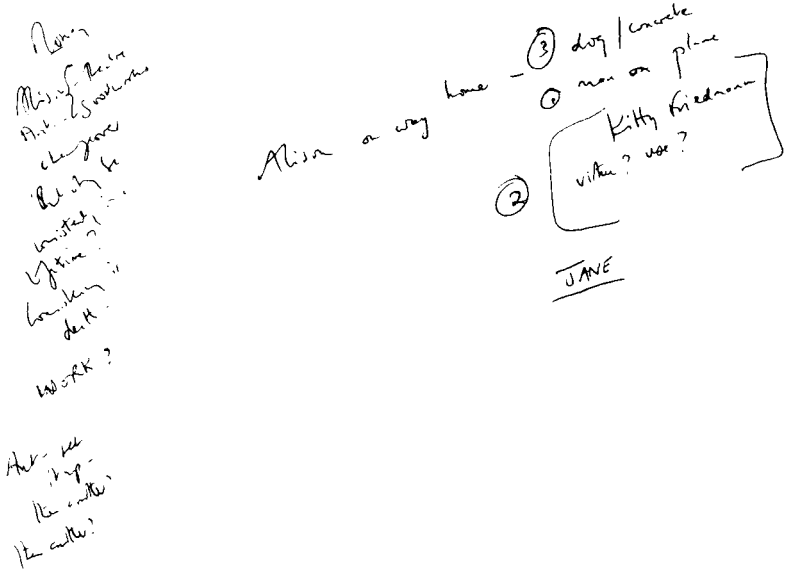
pleaaure at seeing him was irresistable. It reassured him that Alison would surely come back soon, and that some at least of their dreams might be made real. It reminded him that private happiness might, after all, exist, despite the public woes of Britain. And, also, her presence gave him a great deal of harmless extra things to do, which inevitably made his full more ~~eff~~ ~~s~~ less bored, + more busy.

Decide village shop + Maureen -



A manuscript page from The Ice Age, *a novel by Margaret Drabble.*

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Margaret Drabble
The Art of Fiction LXX

Margaret Drabble lives in a red house along a row of terrace houses just up the hill from Hampstead Heath. Her sitting room is also red— bright red—and stretches from the front bay windows which are filled with plants to a large back window which looks out onto the garden. Along one wall there are floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and in one corner there is a baby grand. On top of the piano sits a plant which was given to the author by Doris Lessing. "I don't know what Doris's plant is called. I call it a funnel plant because it has a kind of funnel down which one waters it. Once, it had a big pink bottle brush flower, but I think it never will again."

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In front of the room there is a fireplace with a shiny white mantlepiece. Two ceramic pitchers of bushy dried grasses stand on either side of a gilded mirror and next to them lie pictures and statues and boxes and one large pine cone. Across from the fireplace, several shopping bags lean against one another in the leg space beneath a small desk. It is too small and fine a desk for novel-writing. Drabble writes her books in a room in Bloomsbury.

On the walls there are several paintings. One is gray and geometric: an open door leading from an empty corridor into an empty room. Another is a still life of a table laden with fruit.

Behind Drabble's house, backyards connecting, is the house where John Keats lived. It is a two-story house with many tiny rooms. "They were smaller in those days," said the lady behind the information desk. "They called him little Johnny Keats."

Margaret Drabble is called "Maggie," and she, too, is smaller than one might expect from looking at her photographs. Her face is finer, prettier and younger, surprisingly young for someone who has produced so many books in the past sixteen years. Her eyes are very clear and attentive and they soften when she is amused, as she often is, by the questions themselves and her own train of thought.

INTERVIEWER

Are there any questions you are afraid of being asked?

DRABBLE

No, because I am very good at not answering them. I don't much like being nagged about my private life because it involves others than myself and I haven't got a right to speak for them. But most people are very conscious of this and don't nag. I don't like placing other writers much and avoid the temptation to do so when asked, though I don't mind admitting my immense admiration for Angus Wilson, Saul Bellow and Doris Lessing.

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INTERVIEWER

I know you've done your share of interviewing. What is the first question you ask someone?

DRABBLE

Oh dear. I never know how to begin. I find it to be a very difficult job, actually. I'm rather a bad interviewer because I never ask people things that they don't want to be asked. As soon as they look annoyed or nervous, I never persist.

INTERVIEWER

I read your interview with Doris Lessing and I thought that many of the things that come out of it could have been said about you as well. You quote her as saying "In writing novels, we bring into being what we need to be." Can you comment on that?

DRABBLE

In a sense, the fiction creates the reality, but it's a very complicated relationship. I think if you imagine a certain kind of person, then that person comes into being. You become that person. Or at least this kind of person becomes a possibility. But you have to be careful what you imagine, because the act of imagining is the act of encouraging yourself to be a certain kind of person. The fact of going in a certain direction has something to do with what you imagine as good or proper for yourself.

INTERVIEWER

But it also seems to me, that as far as you're concerned, the kind of person you are has as much to do with fate or accident as it does with self-creation.

DRABBLE

This is what is so interesting about life: choosing to be something and being struck down while you do it by a falling brick. The whole question of free will and choice and determinism is

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inevitably interesting to a novelist. Perhaps I go on about it more than some. Are your characters puppets in the hands of fate or are they really able to make free choices? I think we have a very small area of free choice.

INTERVIEWER

And what is that area?

DRABBLE

We can choose not to be selfish or as self-indulgent or as hard-working as we are by nature. We can choose to go against our nature, but only very slightly. You can't completely alter what you were given without doing yourself a great violence which means that you go mad or become an ineffective person. It also has to do with where you start from. You can't ignore it or cut it out of yourself. I think families change over the generations, but the amount that each person changes is not as great as he thinks it's going to be when he is young.

INTERVIEWER

Was it an accident that you became a writer?

DRABBLE

I wrote my first novel, because I just got married and I was living in Stratford-on-Avon and there was nothing else to do. I was very bored. I had no particular friends there. I'd been very busy up until then—at University, passing examinations—I very nearly took a job that summer and if I had taken a job, I probably wouldn't have written the book. So in a sense it was accidental. Whether I would have written a novel later, I just don't know.

INTERVIEWER

What did you study at Cambridge?

DRABBLE

English Literature. I got a very good degree. I got a hus-

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band, but he was an actor, and worked long hours. At the time, I very much wanted to be an actress and in fact I did act for a year, but by then I had my first novel accepted. I was still very keen on the stage but I was losing interest in it because of the children—I had one and was expecting another—and writing was such a convenient career to combine with having a family. Also I had quite a considerable success with my first novel, so I was encouraged to continue.

INTERVIEWER

Where did the idea for your first novel come from?

DRABBLE

I think it must have been related to my feelings at finding myself, at the age of twenty-one, free, unemployed, wondering where to go, watching my friends and contemporaries to see where they would go. Perhaps it was about the purpose of education for women and the choices it offers.

INTERVIEWER

Did your training as an actress help in developing the characters for your novels?

DRABBLE

I wasn't trained as an actress in any way—I just did it instinctively. And I write in much the same way. I don't think there's much connection between the two. An actress can, and perhaps should, ignore the rest of the drama—she need only know her own role in it. This would be a fatal way to write.

INTERVIEWER

At one point you were an understudy for Vanessa Redgrave. In at least three of your novels there does seem to be an understudy relationship between two characters: In *The Summer Bird-cage* there were Louise and Sarah; in *Jerusalem the Golden,* Clelia and Clara; in *The Waterfall,* Lucy and Jane: very tight pairs in which the narrator was looking up to and

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comparing herself constantly to another woman.

DRABBLE

Yes. I think that is quite a natural process. Most people have a rival figure or model figure while some of us have lots of both. I suppose in my case this was either my older sister, or my best woman friend whom I've used again and again in my novels. The friend was very much a Clelia figure to me in that she came from a more sophisticated background. I still find that fascinating: when two people who are very close have—it's not really a rivalry—rather an imitative relationship. One wants to be like the other person.

INTERVIEWER

Is that possible?

DRABBLE

No. Not really. And as you get older you decide you don't want to be anyway. You'd rather be like yourself. But you realize that over a period of twenty years or so, you have in fact taken on certain aspects of your friends or your siblings. And they have probably taken on certain aspects of you, down to mannerisms and speech traits. . .

INTERVIEWER

Have you put your Cambridge education to good use in your writing? Is there a certain kind of intelligence that makes for a better writer?

DRABBLE

I don't much care for dividing the mental faculties into compartments. I think intuition is a form of intelligence; I would only go as far as to say that too academic an education can inhibit the workings of the creative mind, though it certainly doesn't always suffer—even in a University environment: witness Saul Bellow.

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INTERVIEWER

Do you think that grief can be a creative state of mind?

DRABBLE

I've often worried about this—that if one got really very happy in life, one might not want to write at all. I think grief is creative. And, in some awful way, boredom is creative. When I'm really deeply bored (inevitably I'm rather miserable at the same time) I find this a creative phase because one's got to get something. One's got to rise out of it in some way. And the way that I'm most familiar with is by writing.

INTERVIEWER

Many of your characters say that they're most terrified of boredom.

DRABBLE

Well, so am I. I don't see why other people don't worry about it more. I can't remember who the poet was who said "Life, my friends, is deeply boring, but of course we must not say so." It's not that life is always boring, it's that it becomes boring terribly quickly. I'm rarely bored by myself. I get bored by other people or by being stuck in boring situations.

INTERVIEWER

Jane Gray in *The Waterfall* describes the sensation that she feels when a poem is coming. She says that she can see the changes in the color of the air. Can you see the changes?

DRABBLE

Actually that phrase came from my mother. She could tell when she was getting depressed because the air went black—or so she said. I think the air has a slightly different look about it when words are coming. Elation and depression have a similar effect on one.

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INTERVIEWER

Do you use any "gross and violent stimulents"?

DRABBLE

Certainly I do. Not so many as some people. I drink alcohol. I don't smoke. I drink very strong coffee and very weak tea. Scenery can be a violent stimulant. Wordsworth, I think, was thinking of that. I love it. But rather like Wordsworth, I think too much of it isn't good for you. And I'm so susceptible to horror that reading the newspaper is enough for me; when I actually see the news on television it makes me feel terrible for days.

INTERVIEWER

The newspaper was your primary source for *The Ice Age* wasn't it?

DRABBLE

Yes. In fact the whole idea came from reading papers. There was an enormous amount of economic analysis in the papers, but nothing on the subject of declining Britain in fiction at all.

INTERVIEWER

Did you do any speculating in the stock market or real estate as research for the book?

DRABBLE

Certainly not. I've never been foolish enough to do anything of that sort.

INTERVIEWER

And how did you decide on a Balkan state?

DRABBLE

I had to use a fictitious place because I didn't want to deal with real politics. The visual memories were drawn from Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia.

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INTERVIEWER

You seemed to have trouble deciding where to end that novel. At one point you say, "No, I can't end it this way. This would be a terrible ending."

DRABBLE

For quite a long time I thought I would have a reasonably happy or peaceful ending and then it just didn't seem very plausible. The property market had quieted down but trouble had just broken out somewhere else instead. While I was writing it, I had a Lebanese friend staying with me who was a lecturer at the University at Beirut. He left Beirut because of the civil war. I thought his descriptions were very curious. He didn't seem too alarmed by the violence and at the same time seemed so worried about his job and when he'd be able to go back. I see this is perfectly reasonable, but the job seemed such an irrelevent thing compared to the fact that he was lucky to be alive. It was talking to him that made me feel I ought to put England's problems into some larger context.

INTERVIEWER

Your first novels seem to be primarily character studies and the later books are more concerned with themes.

DRABBLE

I think you're right. You look at people and realize they're all part of some theme whether they like it or not. And all you have to do is perceive the theme and you can fit all kinds of people into the pattern. I used to not be able to see so much at once. I think I had a very narrow vision. I had a very narrow life and so I began with character and with one particular situation: like having an illegitimate baby or having to go where your husband's job is. Now that seems to me very restricting. Too particular. On the other hand, if you lose a sense of particularity, then your writing becomes very boring. It's a struggle to keep the balance between the two now.

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INTERVIEWER

Tell me about your work habits.

DRABBLE

I used to work in the evenings when the children were small, but now I work in the morning. I can't write the whole day long. I have a room where I go because I can't work at home—the telephone and other distractions. I start work about quarter to ten, work through till lunch time. Sometimes I work in the afternoon. During the school holidays I don't get very much done. I've only been able to put in the longer hours since the children have become more accommodating. Even then I feel a bit mean. I always have my head in somebody else's book or my own.

INTERVIEWER

Jane Gray who is a writer in *The Waterfall* says that there is nothing she can do to invoke the capricious muse. "One can really only stand around and wait. Perhaps that's why I'm so unwilling to distract myself." Do you feel this?

DRABBLE

I don't feel quite as helpless as that. There are certain ways of becoming attentive. Like walking. If I go for a long walk, I can think better because I don't have to worry about what I'm doing. But sometimes you can walk for three hours and it's only just as you're putting the supper in the oven that you realize exactly what the answer is.

INTERVIEWER

When you sit down at the typewriter do you sit there a while or do you begin to write immediately?

DRABBLE

If a book is going reasonably well, I write terribly fast. And I don't re-write very much either. I really just rattle along. I think that this is because I've always been short of time. I've

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always been saving up the time to work so that by the time I actually get to the typewriter I usually have a very good idea of what I've got to get through. It's all there waiting.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel when you are writing?

DRABBLE

I tend to get very irritable when it's going badly and I'm very cheerful and benevolent when it's going well. I mean "going well" could mean describing the most gruesome and terrible scene. But if I'm stuck then I get cross.

INTERVIEWER

Can you describe the process of transforming material into fiction?

DRABBLE

Not sticking too closely to the accidental and circumstantial elements of the original material—but being able to recognize when some things—a name, a certain kind of face or voice, a nationality—are an essential part of the subject matter and therefore cannot be omitted or transformed. When I started *The Realms of Gold* I was trying to think of something really amusing and cheerful and I thought of the octopus I saw in the museum at Naples. I can't remember what I was doing in this maritime museum. I can't remember who took me. But suddenly there it was, a lot of imagery of nature: the natural world of species, the flora and fauna, the fact that Frances's father studied newts. It all just seemed to fit very nicely. Once you've got a starting image, the thing just naturally goes on.

INTERVIEWER

Did you know what Frances looked like?

DRABBLE

Yes. I had a very clear picture of what she looked like. Again

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the character develops in a strange way. While I was writing the first section a friend of mine pointed out to me that none of the women in my previous novels had been able to drive a car and how odd this was. It's not really odd, it's because I can't drive. So I thought, this woman, is supposed to be a successful archeologist. She would clearly be able to drive a car. So I wrote that scene where she's getting Karel's car out of the mud and while I was describing her doing that, I suddenly had a very clear picture of a very good friend of mine who used to drive me around on holidays. She's a tremendously strong woman and good at changing wheels and punctures and that kind of fused with the picture I already had of Frances.

INTERVIEWER

Frances's heroine was a woman named Boadicea who waged an unsuccessful battle against the Romans, but was "victorious in defeat." Was she also a heroine of yours?

DRABBLE

No, not really. I think she was probably a savage fool. I don't know much about Boadicea really except that she was the Queen of the Iceni. As a child I admired that kind of warlike heroism. I don't so much admire it now. I think Joan of Arc is a terrible bore, perhaps because I don't like the plays about her.

INTERVIEWER

Who are your heroines now?

DRABBLE

Mrs. Gaskell and George Eliot in a way. Shakespeare's Cleopatra has always enraptured me, though I don't suppose I'd like to be like that. George Sand perhaps is the nearest to a heroine because she had such a full life and was so generous and spontaneous and cared nothing about petty things, only about true ones. She never cut herself off. She cared for people. She was inexhaustable and I admire that.

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INTERVIEWER

How did you amuse yourself as a child?

DRABBLE

I read books about Boadicea and the Lady of Shalot. I started reading very early and read with passion for years. My sisters—I have an older sister and a younger sister—also enjoyed reading. We used to write plays and put on plays and have fairly elaborate games. Swimming and riding were the only sports I ever enjoyed. I was very fond of horses, as many little girls are.

INTERVIEWER

Was there a ditch in your childhood?

DRABBLE

I've always been absolutely fascinated by ditches and ponds and water beetles. I lived in Sheffield when I was a child. It's a large northern industrial city but has very beautiful ponds and botanical gardens and country side nearby. We used to collect fish and stickleback and newts and tadpoles and goodness knows what.

But the ditch and the house in *The Realms of Gold* is based partly on my grandmother's house. There was a very nasty pond which is now filled in. But that feeling about going back to one's childhood was very much what I was writing about.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think were the formative experiences of your childhood?

DRABBLE

I was rather a lonely child when I was small. I made lots of friends when I was about thirteen or fourteen—when it became all right to be intellectual. But when I was a little child I was often ill. I had a bad chest and was always rather feeble—hated games. I make myself sound very pathetic which

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I wasn't, but I certainly didn't feel I was part of the mainstream. I used to spend a lot of time alone, writing and reading and just being secretive. My sister was not very nice to me—my big sister. I used to tag along after her and she was always . . . well, she used to play with me a lot when we were little . . . I think this is what went wrong. I used to expect her to go on playing with me and of course she got bigger and didn't want me around. That made me very sad and I always felt that I had been shut out, rejected by her.

INTERVIEWER

It must have been a pretty important feeling to write your first novel about it.

DRABBLE

Well, my sister and I are very similiar. She's a novelist and our lives have been parallel in many ways. She has been an important part of my life. One's relationship with one's siblings and parents is something that you're going to write about again and again, in different forms.

INTERVIEWER

Do your friends and family ever see themselves in your novels and does that make things difficult?

DRABBLE

If they're not pleased, then they don't tell me. I've been slightly worried about one or two portraits but nobody has ever said anything. I don't think I've ever hurt anybody's feelings. It's amazing how pleased some people are by some descriptions of themselves which I would have thought not necessarily very flattering.

INTERVIEWER

Your characters, especially the protagonists, have very interesting names. Some of them seem to pay homage to other writers: Sarah Bennett, Emma Lawrence, Clara Maugham.

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How do you come up with them and what do they mean?

DRABBLE

My early characters simply had names I like. I still tend to do this. The children in *The Garrick Year* are called Flora and Joseph and I called my own son Joseph after writing the book. Rosamund (and Rose) are faintly symbolic because both are very English (the English rose). Jane Gray is a victim; Frances Wingate, a winner; Simon, an apostle. But I don't do this very consciously. The choice of name tends to affect the development of the character, even the plot. This may be so in real life also.

INTERVIEWER

Do you find yourself getting involved with people in order to use them as characters?

DRABBLE

No. The books always came long after I've been mixed up with people and there are some people whom I know very well that I would never use—out of a feeling of anxiety or embarrassment about using them. On the other hand there are some people I know who have haunted me as characters and as real living people and they just had to be used, again and again. In fact, there is one particular person that I've used both in a good light and in a bad light. In one book he looks a monster and in the next book he looks very nice. I'm not sure which he really is.

One thing I have never been very good at is creating "good" mothers. I'd written books and books before someone pointed out that I was perpetually producing these "bad" mothers.

INTERVIEWER

Did your mother notice?

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DRABBLE

If she did, she kept it to herself. She enjoys my books. She's very good on them. The worst mother in my novels is the one in *Jerusalem the Golden* who was modeled on my grandmother who made my mother's life a misery. My mother is what I call a "good-enough" mother. We have our problems, but then who doesn't with her mother. We get on well, better than we used to. But it's as though there's an ancestral ghost haunting the family. I hear myself saying things that my grandmother used to say.

INTERVIEWER

Is there much correlation between your life and the life of your characters?

DRABBLE

There's a certain amount. When I was writing *The Needle's Eye* I was very keen that I shouldn't buy any new clothes until I had finished the book: that Rose wouldn't have done it. I was incredibly shabby by the end of the book. I've slightly rejected that now. I mean, I'm still shabby but that's because I can't be bothered to go and buy the clothes. It ceased to be a strong principle. But in a way I was testing out the principle by writing the book. That really is one of the reasons for writing: that you test out a certain life style.

INTERVIEWER

What do you like best about your novels?

DRABBLE

I think what I'm most surprised about is the fact that they're quite readable and I think, quite amusing. Other people don't agree, but I think they're quite funny. Now this is something that I would never have expected of myself, because I was very keen on tragedy. But when I wrote my first novel and decided that it was going to have a funny ending (the beautiful older sister caught by her husband in the bathtub with her lover) I

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thought "I'm really going to be a different kind of person!" This is wonderful, I felt. Life is going to be good, not bad.

INTERVIEWER

What makes you uneasy?

DRABBLE

What a difficult question. Money makes me uneasy. The fact that some people have more of it than others. There's an advert in the personal column of the *Times* in which a man says, "Will somebody please explain to me why some people are paid more than others. Does the fact that I get no replies mean that there is no answer?" I must write to him and say that I agree: there is no answer.

And other people's misery makes me very uneasy. The injustices of life: that some people have such a terrible time—not necessarily even in material things, not even physically—but just psychologically, or in their personal lives.

INTERVIEWER

What do you find most difficult in writing your novels?

DRABBLE

I find it difficult to write about very stupid people. I'm aware that my characters tend to be not only intelligent, but intelligent about themselves. One of the things that I really admire is the ability to write with dignity and understanding about people who are not aware of themselves. I think most people are more intelligent than they are given credit for, but that they don't express themselves in a way people find accessible. I look at some people and I don't know what their minds contain. And that I find a problem.

And men. Writing about men. I used to find it difficult because I didn't trust myself to know what they were like. I still feel uneasy when I describe men's clothes and their offices. I have to do research, find out what they really look like, how they talk, and what kind of work pattern they have.

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INTERVIEWER

So you think there are major differences between men and women?

DRABBLE

I don't think they're as major as I once did. But that's partly because I know more men now. I realize I can have as personal a conversation with a man as with a woman.

INTERVIEWER

What male authors do you think write particularly well about women?

DRABBLE

I think many men have written well about women. But I would cite Arnold Bennett *(The Old Wive's Tale, Anna of Five Towns, Hilda Lessways)* and Angus Wilson, whose novels *Late Call* and *The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot* are very remarkable and full of insight.

INTERVIEWER

Cars and men are closely associated in your novels.

DRABBLE

That's because I haven't got one.

INTERVIEWER

How deliberate is the symbolism one detects from time to time?

DRABBLE

It's nearly always unintentional. I look back at it and think, "Oh, that relates to that." When you're writing in a certain vein, everything grows out of the same source. Occasionally it's more deliberate. I was very much aware when I got to the end of *The Ice Age* that it would be nice to have another bird. I had put a bird on the first page; it seemed obvious to put a

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bird on the last. And there were a lot of dead dogs in that book, but then there were just a lot of dead dogs around that year. It's a natural associative process, really. It's not exactly symbolism, it's just how life is. You notice one thing and then you notice the same thing again tomorrow.

INTERVIEWER

What would you say is the function of a novel?

DRABBLE

I don't think it's to teach, but I don't think it's simply to entertain, either. It's to explore new territory. To extend one's knowledge of the world. And to illumine what one sees in it. That's a fairly moral concept, isn't it?

INTERVIEWER

I don't know if that's moral.

DRABBLE

I think it is. Exploring—illuminating—is slightly moral. One wants to see better, clearer, more. But I read other people's novels to find out what's going on in the world and what other people are like. If I also recognize the same things in myself, then I feel all the more interested.

INTERVIEWER

You've said that one can't have art without morality. What does that mean?

DRABBLE

To make a statement that is considered and thought out is moral.

INTERVIEWER

Your novels seem to have become more political and philosophical and even moral since your interview, in 1972, with Doris Lessing.

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DRABBLE

The problem in my early novels was that I simply hadn't the ability to express the range of my feeling. I couldn't technically do it. When I wrote my first novel I didn't know how to write a novel at all. I only began to be aware that I could actually write a novel and include some of the things I deeply cared about when I reached *The Needle's Eye.* I may have learned that from Doris Lessing. I started reading her around that period.

INTERVIEWER

If you didn't know how to write a novel until *The Needle's Eye,* how did you write your first five?

DRABBLE

My first novel I just wrote, day after day, like a very long letter, with no conscious sense of form or plot at all. In the second, I had a little more sense of shape. In the third, yet more. In the fourth, I tried to write (not very successfully) in the third person; in the fifth, I queried this method of narration and by *The Needle's Eye,* I found I could do what I'd always wanted, which was to write a third-person novel with the point of view spread between various characters. I now have a much better sense of control. If I find something missing I know how to put it in. I can feel the rhythm of the plot much better than in the old days.

INTERVIEWER

Which of your novels are you most fond of?

DRABBLE

I think probably *The Needle's Eye.* Partly because it is the longest. It was hard work and I felt proud of it. And partly because I was very fond of that period of my life. I like shabby houses and I like small children.

I like all my novels for different reasons, but I've gone off some of them. I'm slightly fed up with *The Millstone,* but I think that's probably a reaction against everyone else always

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liking it best. It's much the most often translated into other languages. I get far more letters about it. I'm bored with it.

INTERVIEWER

You must get a lot of letters.

DRABBLE

Yes I do. From old friends long lost and interesting new people who write and tell me amazing things about themselves. I also hear from very tiresome people who do the same and for not very honourable reasons. As I can't always tell the difference at first glance, I tend to waste a lot of precious time on people whose real interest in what I have to say is negligible and who have no conception of what other things I have to get through. What really annoys me are the ones who write to say, I am doing your book for my final examinations and could you please tell me what the meaning of it is. I find it just so staggering—that you're supposed to explain the meaning of your book to some total stranger! If I knew what the meanings of my books were, I wouldn't have bothered to write them.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever find critics useful?

DRABBLE

Sometimes. I find what they call "constructive" criticism helpful. Occasionally you come across somebody who says, "Why didn't she do so and so?" And you think, "God, why didn't I?" And he says, "Why doesn't she do so and so next time?" And you think, "Yes, why don't I?"

INTERVIEWER

In your review of Virginia Woolf's collection of letters, you say that she must have found her critical powers comforting. Do you?

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DRABBLE

Yes. Because they enable me to defend myself from other critics. This is not very important but it is useful. Some writers have no training in the jargon of literature—cannot explain or justify themselves—I can always hit back, or, more politely, provide explanations for what I have done. Also, I can intersperse novels with reviews etc. which makes for variety of work and is fun.

INTERVIEWER

John Updike has accused you of being shamelessly dependent upon coincidence. And yet in your novels, it seems to serve as much more of a theory than a device.

DRABBLE

What I'm perpetually trying to work out is the relationship between coincidence and plan. And in fact, I have this deep conviction that if you were to get high up enough over the world, you would see things that look like coincidence are, in fact, part of a pattern. This sounds very mystical and ridiculous, but I don't think it is. I think that I, in particular, and maybe certain other people have a need to perceive this pattern in coincidence. It may be that psychologically we're so afraid of the unpredictable, of the idea of chaos and disorder, that we wish to see order.

Take the fact that you should bump into somebody after ten years on your birthday after having last seen them at your birthday party. This is a coincidence, but it appears to have a meaning. We know it's superstitious, but so many times in my life I've had coincidences like this that I'm driven to look for another underlying meaning.

There's an essay by Freud in which he discusses the uncanny feeling of being both familiar with and utterly surprised by something. I think this is one of the most distressing, but important feelings in life. The feeling that I knew this all along, but I never knew it before. Freud would argue we feel this about sex. The first time we find out what it actually is, we

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think "how absolutely astonishing and impossible," but at the same time we know we knew.

I'm sure death feels a bit like that. In fact I've often had a dream in which I am just about to die and my last words are, "Oh, that was what it was like. I did know really, but now I know for real." And then I wake up.

INTERVIEWER

I remember you wrote about a dream in one of your books—a very frightening dream about a gigantic weaving and all the loose threads and trying to make a pattern fit together. . . .

DRABBLE

Are you sure that's not Doris Lessing? It sounds like a Doris Lessing dream to me.

INTERVIEWER

Are your dreams useful for your work?

DRABBLE

I used to think not, because I get very bored when I'm reading other people's novels and find them full of dreams. But in fact, I use my own dreams as tests for the way I feel about people, or things, or things going wrong. They're relations of a sort. I have a lot of landscape dreams. One of my best dreams is that I'm in this wonderfully beautiful landscape that just goes on and on, through which I can almost make myself travel; it perpetuates itself. I'm aware that I'm dreaming because it's so intensely beautiful.

But I don't dream on purpose as people are supposed to in analysis.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever been in analysis?

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DRABBLE

No.

INTERVIEWER

Have you read Jung?

DRABBLE

Only bits and pieces. I've read more Freud than Jung, actually.

INTERVIEWER

Well, he's got this theory called synchronicity which is about coincidence not being coincidence at all.

DRABBLE

Freud takes a harsher view. His view is that they *are* coincidences and the idea that our need to see them as not being so, like our need to avoid that death really is death, contorts the whole of human life: that the whole of human culture is distorted by our desperate need to avoid the truth.

I'm perpetually tossed between these two interpretations of life. It is a fact that if you have faith of a certain sort, then certain things will happen for you or for those that you love. But this is only in a way like watering a plant. One of the images I like best is the plant in *The Waterfall* which Jane keeps on watering long after she think's that it's dead. And then it begins to grow again.

And the same is true of people or personal relationships. You go on believing in them long after everything looks hopeless and that child or that relationship or that person, will in fact, revive.

INTERVIEWER

One of the prisoners in *The Ice Age* was reading *The Roots of Coincidence* by Koestler. Did you read that?

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DRABBLE

I've never managed to finish it. It's about, oh dear, what are those little things that are too small to be seen—quarks and things like that. It's about randomness and that if you throw dice so many times, it isn't random. A pattern will emerge.

When I was a child I used to think that mathematics and statistics were the most boring thing in the world. I find statistics increasingly fascinating: if you ask the right questions about enough things, you can spot things that nobody could discover in a lifetime of personal discovery.

But I suppose we just never know what the pattern is. I suppose it is perfectly possible that one will die without knowing what it was all about. But I have this deep faith that it will all be revealed to me one day. One day I shall just see into the heart of the whole thing. A lot of people give up. They realize that there isn't an answer. Maybe that's what will happen to me. Maybe when I'm ten years older I'll decide that I was just deluding myself. But I haven't yet got to that stage.

—Barbara Milton

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Dreams Objects Moments

Pati Hill

We are at war and I am on a train leaving for the country.

I am troubled because I suspect it might be better to spend the war in the city.

Out the window I see soldiers cooking lunch in kitchen sinks and other unlikely containers.

Their fires burn cheerily and I am jealous of them.

Beside me is a man from my home town.

I think he should recognize me but he gives no sign of it.

I wonder if perhaps I have re-become a child.

When I get tired of this speculation, I pull the emergency cord.

We are picnicing on my grandmother's lawn when a gazing ball from the Mohecan Hotel in Westerly, Rhode Island come sidling up.

My Uncle Jim (who holds interesting views on politics and goes to church in his own attic) gives a whoop and starts chasing it away, but most people think they should throw a butterfly net over it and lead it to safety before it bursts itself open on the railroad tracks.

Too late!

We kids start picking up the sharp, moon-shaped fragments and stuffing them in our pockets, paying no attention to the mayor who says what we are doing is illegal.

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Throughout this dream, three black women are seated alternately on me, a small boy and a person I can't get a good look at.

I dream that the toenails of our ancestors have dug into us deeply during the night.

I awaken in dread and find that the cats have unwound a ball of twine all over the room, making cradles through the legs of the furniture.

This airship originally belonged to a young couple who now wish to appear conventional, so no longer use it.

This is what the captain of the airship answers when I ask if the owners won't miss it while we are aloft.

The captain certainly seems conventional enough, but despite this and the idyllic weather, I begin to dream of a tempest above torpid waters and hear the captain groan, "Take the controls, *je ne suis pas bien!*" though why he speaks French is hard to say—he is clearly a Swede.

The airship is gigantic and constructed, not of a single container like a Zepplin, but of a multitude of intricately connected floats and pontoons of aluminum colored cloth.

Minutes before I have rushed from a nearby casino—we are in someplace like Vichy or Marianbad—crying, "Today! Let's go today," and the captain has thrilled me by stolidly nodding his head.

And I have a mission of some kind; that is evident by the assurance with which I clamber on board.

Nevertheless, the erratic behavior of the unwieldy craft with its vast interior divided into irregular spaces by the scaffolding that holds its sides apart and its primitive instruments, so much more complex-looking than the dials of a modern computer, cause me great anguish which stays with

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me after I have awakened and closed the window that had blown open on our heads in real life.

I can't throw off this dream within a dream. And the name of the ship was the Anabelle-Lee.

I am entertaining the queen's emissary and a lady very like the queen in a haphazard restaurant run by my husband.

The queen's party keeps moving and we have dreadful toasted biscuits for dessert.

I drink the emissary's milk with jam by mistake. And a little because I like him, to tell the truth!

Time rushes by in an old-fashioned bathing suit, all its wild white moths fuming out at the crotch.

What will we do with the babies? I wonder. (At present, they seem to be imbedded in amber like million-year-old paperweights.)

While I'm washing the dishes a white owl floats in shaped like a limestone sink or a World War I airplane.

What will we do with the babies? I wonder again.

Now, descending under nylon, that still-new perfect fabric, soldiers of World War II (*bodies* of soldiers of World War II).

I wake up in a panic for fear I'll be late to World War III.

As I leave the house of my friend, a giant dead sheep slips off the wall and pursues me. But now I see this sheep is only half-dead. But nevertheless it pursues me like a cloud of old snow, trailing itself broadly over the ground and catching on all the houses of this Ideal New England Village.

As I flee I think of calling out or flinging myself into one of the brightly lit cellars in which outsized models of people are going about the business of living—drinking "glug" etc.—but I am not really so frightened of this sheep—of this *rug*—

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only angry with myself for having forgotten it was on the wall beside my friend's house, and filled with guilt for my part in helping to restrain the new doctor from leaving town.

He is a kind man and I grow to love him as we are borne along Main Street in the automobile of one of the poeple whose accomplice I am.

But is this *really* what I dreamed? I wonder as I come awake and, as my suspicions grow, I see ever more clearly the face of my friend.

It is like an electric meter or an equation written on a child's blackboard, and full of character as she says goodnight just before the sheep falls on me.

All around us linger long benches and lean horses from the doctor's town, and I am doomed, doomed!

Will I never learn to turn my back on what doesn't concern me?

My cheeks are bright red and I am suffocating as I reach for my journal and start recording this dream in huge legible handwriting.

I am a rocket.

As I shoot through the atmosphere I lose different parts of myself, most of them invisible to me though they can be seen by my passengers.

I have invented a new sort of bed and pay a man to be astonished by it.

I don't think he is astonished enough and start noting down all the things that would improve my life, such as noting down the things that would improve my life.

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General de Gaulle and I share a hotel room.

His nurse comes often to give him injections, but while she is away he makes indecent proposals.

At a ceremony for a dead statesman he hastily chooses a tombstone from a truckload of markers and gives me a goose.

I hope the nurse will soon interrupt his attentions but she seems to have abandoned him.

The General announces our engagement.

I stuff a cookie into my mouth to show my disrespect.

The general pulls a long chain from his mouth at the end of which is a St. Christopher medal.

I decide, after all, he has a sense of humor.

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Portfolio

Italics

Alexis Smith

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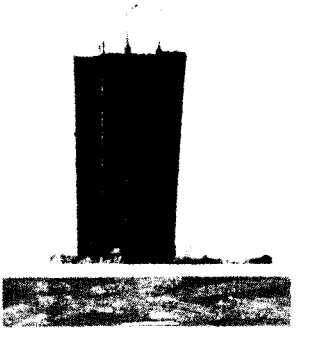

"Don't tell me the plot," I said. "I'm only a bit player."

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The color of her hair was dusky red, like a fire under control but still dangerous.

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Nobody knew what happened except the boys playing pinball games in the drugstore on the corner. They know everything except how to hold a job.

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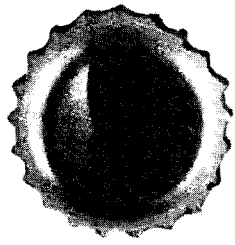
I felt terrible. I felt like an amputated leg.



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She smoothed her hair with that quick gesture, like a bird preening itself. Ten thousand years of practice behind it.

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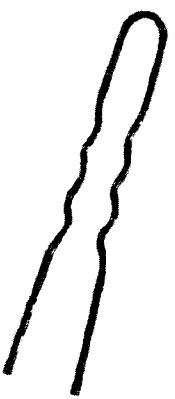
I could see the car a half a block down the side street. It looked like a new market opening.



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I wouldn't say she looked exactly wistful, but neither did she look as hard to get as a controlling interest in General Motors.

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"Listen, Marlowe. You're being a damn fool. I want to tell you —"

"Tell yourself. You have a captive audience."

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Jay Parini

Seasons Of The Skin

The beginning was hills, moss-covered stones,
October flowers. I climbed all day,
those damp beginnings. I felt
your arms like roots around me, love
like burdocks clinging to my legs;
the trees cried nothing but wind.

Winter was a crop of bones.
I remember your valley rimed with frost,
the slippery ledges, branches under snow.
I saw that your eyes were ponds of love
locked over with ice. I pecked
for a season into that gaze.

The spring was running. Icicles,
glazed by sunlight, narrowed to a drip.
And the moon shot awkward glances.
A nub of crocus started from your belly;
there was water spinning over stones.
I listened in the green-leaved wind.

Then a jay flipped over the pines,
a blue tail flashing. Sunlight
sharpened its edges on the rocks,
and feathery bracken softened your body.
I drew upon you in the heated grass
to see that your eyes were open water.

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Sharon Olds

The Sisters of Sexual Treasure

As soon as my sister and I got out of our
mother's house, all we wanted to
do was fuck, obliterate
her tiny sparrow body and narrow
grasshopper legs. The men's bodies
were like our father's body!
The massive
hocks, flanks, thighs, elegant
knees, long tapered calves—
we could have him there, the steep forbidden
buttocks, backs of the knees, the cock
in our mouth, ah the cock in our mouth.
Like explorers who have
discovered a lost city, we went
nuts with joy, undressed the men
slowly and carefully, as if
uncovering buried artifacts which
proved our theory of the lost culture:
that if Mother said it wasn't there,
it was there.

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Thomas McCarthy

The Word 'Silk'

after Joao Cabral de Melo Neto

Through your love words became clear,
were born again with a strange vigour,
like flat lines transformed through prayer,

or the sudden uncovering of oneself in verse,
the pleasure of a consummate image
or, coming from your lips, the word 'Silk.'

The word 'Silk'; a silk scarf brought
to the surface of your mysterious person,
a cat's tail stroking my face, insistent, taut;

and the word 'Sedative' that I take from 'Silk':
it is certain that you never induced sleep
but caused an animal awakeness, a wild

muscular presence, whenever you stopped to talk
or touch. The way 'Silk' flowed from you
when you left the car, I could see my words walk

across the road, down the Institute avenue:
and like a cat, or perishable silk, you peeled
away; coming and going, gradually working loose.

Yesterday, you zoomed past in your small blue
car, waving furiously. Under the trees in the Mall
a woman fed swans. Age. Compassion. I knew

that our love would have been a pointless web
of memory had it not altered so many words,
informed by feeling; Love, Love-Touch. . . Silk.

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Lynne Lawner

Fresh Snow

Roll me in protective layers
of yourself, wool scarves.
Take me out in the snow.
We'll leave the shape of your stiff coat,
my heavy muffler and high Russian cap
on the white stuff over the dark stuff.
They will not know
whether we were dressed or undressed,
inside or out, yours or mine,
in this world or another. . . .

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Thomas Lux

Capable As Hive

(for Carol)

We begin every night ignorant,
two xenophobes called in from exile,
pleased to the point of buoyant.
Fevergiving we'll name our glad child.

By dawn, a change is perceptible.
Both of us—our faces and four ears smeared
with honey, mouths open, capable
as hive—one, two, duo mutineers

ready to walk the circular planks.
Against the air is the way we lean.
—For the love we do there's not much thanks,
for the love we do improves all dreams.

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James L. White

The Salt Ecstasies

Salt me down where love was
on a blue burn to remember the real pain.
I'm worn out from my back's arch and pull,
bending like a crazy house mirror to your needs,
in this endless flesh revolt,
trying to win with my mouth and ass.

I want to be your yoke this time,
pushing you away in the dusty light
from gutting me to nothing,
and stay drawn in,
like an old girl after a hard Saturday night,
her body empty of carriage,
alone and complete in the room's stillness.

I leave you first in sleep:
my breasts, my V, and hair,
then take the early bus to Laurel
away from the raw and nameless.

Some farm kid presses against my leg.
I look at the long backs of men in the fields
and doze to dream you're going through me like winter
bone
and long for your logs of arms
pushing me down into some contract with flesh
until I break free for air.

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Patricia Hampl

Tired Of

Not the wrist of the sunset
which sinks every night
below the electrical wires—
that is pink, I'm not tired of pink.
But cover up the stars, the stars
are the absence of clouds.
Let the clouds come, clouds
are vague.
Say you didn't betray me,
or am I being too clear again?
I'm a primary color
in your presence.
On the window sill a blue bottle
is filling with pink light.
I won't hate you, I won't love you.
There is the possibility of floating,
a pink cloud is scudding by.
French-blue is right here,
it is serenity
even though the color is bright
and as you said, much too obvious.

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Elizabeth Spires

After Three Japanese Drawings

1. Fat Man
(Shokado)

Clearly, the man eats too much.
He holds a half-eaten plum, reaches unthinking
toward the empty bowl for another.
His manners are bad. He embarrasses his guests
by unfastening his pants, scolds
the thin children who break into his orchard
and find nothing. He thinks of himself as wise,
but look, he ignores the hovering butterfly,
smiles not at his wife, now approaching,
but at the fruit she carries.
More fruit for him.

2. Girl Monkey Trainer
(Kyosai)

Her family was poor. Her feet big as brooms.
No one in the village would marry her.
One night she ran away, taking
the small amount that was to be her dowry.
On the road she met a man
with two monkeys. He gave her one
for spending the night with him.
Now she lives far from the provinces, smiling
often at her good fortune. Her monkey performs well.
She buys herself silk scarves, has tea
whenever she wants it, rice cakes, wine.

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3. Yeoman Murdering His Deformed Wife With A Sickle (Kuniyoshi)

The marriage was arranged. There were no children.
Nights when they slept, he shrank
from her side, shriveled like snakeskin
left in the sun. Dreamed the old men of the village
offered him their hoary cheeks to kiss.
He complained of the nettle soup she fixed,
so she fixed other soups and still he complained.
In early spring, after a winter of rain,
they stood in the garden arguing. He reached
for the sickle, meaning only to cut off her hand.
But she screamed. Travelers were crossing
the bridge not far from where they stood.
Alarmed, he swung the sickle again and again
till she was quiet under him.

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Arthur Vogelsang

Indian Summer In North America

The last warm night,
Sleep after ugly crying,
And we're under a sheet staring up
Like drifting on our backs in Florida
Lonely or small in the ocean as we are so
I was black drunk last night
And walking to work (it gets hotter all day)
Among many leaves I step on a letter
That begins I love you dearly.
I bend and the booze, a splinter, slides into place;
I stand and it shifts like fog crossing a summer
River. As I read (the lovers are nameless)
My friends are sliding into revolving chairs in nine parts of the country, ghosts
That crouch like dancers at a distance in the woods.
The letter uses no names, first or last. It says I love you dearly. And
I'm sorry. Sorry, sorry, sorry. Then
It gets stupid and proposes a deal.
A plane is circling and floating into place,
An old girl friend (she's palpable, standing close)
Is fishing on a wide river
Buoyed by today's rough warm water.
Everyone dear in all those states will go home and have a beer or a whiskey
But it's afternoon and your voice on the phone
Is sliding on the back of my head
And, get ready, we look up together—
Those are people drifting down like leaves
Toward you and I think toward me.

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A Polish Joke

Alexander Theroux

I

"The center, the center."

"Zontle?"

"The *middle* of town. Put it that way."

"Ah, meetzle!" he recognized, somewhat chuffed, and then sighted his nose down the street in the direction of the Rynek, or Square, of Warsaw's famous Old Town, which I had noticed, especially for its flat-faced mansions of fading pastels, while being taxied from the train station to the hotel the night previous in a 1939 DeSoto. Remember those little rubber-propellered fans above the driver's seat?

We stood in the doorway of the old Orbis-Europejski Hotel, me and Wietzel, my waiter—and, let it be said, my first Polish acquaintance—who, in a comradely way, held my elbow and glanced up at me with the fondness of his little snowman eyes, two wee raisins set in a doughy face round as a

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ducatoon and the color of that apron of greasy duck girdling his paunch. He farted. It didn't matter. I love a contactee situation.

"I see, I get the bus at Old Town then?"

"Yes, your honesty. There is not any ruler without an exception." Then Wietzel peered closer. "No automobibble you?"

"No," I sighed. "I'm afraid not."

"This too is as you vish," he smiled, dipping a shoulder. "Put your confidence at my."

"Good."

"Kood," came the choric response. Wietzel scurried about me, nodding. "Must," he managed, cutely walking two fingers across his cuff, "must to go this way on your foot, krab the bus, and, um, best for luck, also too. Don't interompt me. Because is so varm, please to take *woda sodowa* for sips who make you cold." He then slid from somewhere a bottle of bright orange soda water and, allowing for no refusal—this effected by closed eyes and clucks—pressed it onto me, and frankly I wasn't ungrateful. It was August, month of the sickle. The sun bore down, shimmering all. My shoes were melting. I was anxious to be off. "Somshine," Wietzel grinned, picking up a handful of mud, "is making pisses on airth."

I buckled my gear and was about to say goodbye. But his face, suddenly, creased wistfully like a slowly de-aerating balloon. He humbly bent over his cupped hand, the two dots of his eyes snapping sheepishly. I leaned closer, only to hear the whisper I believe I had already heard twice before.

"Carmel Tigarette?"

Poland, smaller than the New Mexico from which I myself hailed—and where at a recognized university I proudly, and for some time, held a chair in radio astronomy—found me a passionate pilgrim. I had logged into Warsaw, with a frightful case of railway kidney, only the night before, my first

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visit, in a brown train screeching to deaf heaven, my sole diversions all the way from dim Berlin nothing more than a microscopically-printed copy of Mickiewicz's epical *Pan Tadeusz* and the not very random conversation of a ballet dancer from Poznan who, attaching himself to me, kept putting his hand on my shin, calling me "lalitchka," and trying to ply me with the national drink, the mere smell from which pinched shut my nose and caused shooting pains in the area of Wirsung's Duct. Contactee, yes, but with limits, ok? I mean, I had a job to do. You see, I'd secured my papers, letters of introduction, visas—even got several injections of iron from a neighboring neurologist—and set off, a cud of anticipation in my throat, outward bound for Poland. I was hot for facts. I adore science. Point is, I was in the process of writing—and simultaneously, of course, updating the earlier spatchcock works of Starowolski, Broscius, and Gassendi—a biography of Copernicus. The astronomer Nicholas Copernicus? Exactly.

I am a frequent contributor to *Sky and Telescope*.

Fortune, then, immediately smiled. Some background: this waiter Wietzel, he that morning seeing me off on my lateral trip to the birth-place of Copernicus, had dropped a bombshell. A. Bomb. Shell, let me tell you. In the course of serving me dinner of hot *krupnik* and fat, Wietzel casually mentioned, out of the blue! that he himself actually owned Copernicus's very own alpenstock. The original *Chakera*! He told me, but garbled, its history. Never you mind, I thought, I would have that alpenstock, no matter what the cost, or the sun would never be as bright for me again. Well, the poor gormless fellow just blurted it out—and I should sit by? I'm not an Albuquerquian for nothing. But then—get ready!—he apprised me, also off-hand and in his laughably malapropistic English, that he alone knew some secrets which he had never told any body about the relationship between the great genius and his mysterious mistress. For a biographer to know such a thing? I was a-quiver.

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Thanking jolly old Wietzel, and resolved utterly to return that same night to jimmy him of his secrets (to say nothing of niggling that 500-year-old antique) I trotted away toward the Old Town with glee to catch my bus. I wasn't a hundred steps when, lo, I heard—"Hey, meester man!" I turned around. There stood Wietzel in the middle of the sidewalk—arms raised and circling, head melodramatically thrown back, bulletshaped nose fast in the air like a cartoon. It was an opera singer, poised for high C. Then the little devil let go his note: *"Mikolaj Kopernik!"*

II

I went to Toruń—ca. 115 miles from Warsaw—an old Hanseatic city of about 70,000 inhabitants, famous, of course, as the birthplace of Copernicus who lived, died, and was buried in Poland. Having arrived, I rented an old pretzel, which they called a bicycle, but one of its vulcanized inner tubes blew on an unremarkable country road left me for the hour it took to re-map out my bearings not overly absorbed, if the truth be told, in the drab peasant cottages, a windmill or two, or the rosy babushkas mangling flax who, for me, for my Leica, looked up with embarrassed frowns. Allow me an anecdote? I was backing up at one point for depth-of-field and unwittingly, not seeing the cowfold I should have, won their captious hearts by sliding—then *slop*!—right into guess what? Right. I can't quite forgive their yoops of laughter nor their toothless exclamations, so often were they repeated, as they pointed at me and bawled, *"Krowa gowno! Krowa gowno!" Krowa,* I figured it out, cow. and *gowno*? Right.

Then I walked back, disgusted, to Toruń.

The house in which Copernicus had lived and the dark-red brick observatory where he worked—and over which flew the

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flag of the white eagle on a red shield—looked like a massive Edwardian toilet. I saw his astrolabe, his day-book, a chart of the planets he'd made in metal. There were rows of Galilean telescopes with out-of-date concave eyeglasses. On the wall hung a series of prints of the great fellow: a bright-eyed gentleman, usually, with a page-boy haircut sitting before an astrolabe in his scholar's fur-lined robes. I even saw a vial that contained the dye he fastidiously used on his hair. (May I mention here that, hard as I looked, I noticed no *chakera*?)

I took copious notes on everything, thinking all the while, as I threaded from glass case to glass case, that I'd at last got to the center of things. There I was, in the house of the great astronomer of heavenly bodies. It was astrospectroscopal! The Bachelor Canon himself, Pan Nicholas Copernicus, the man who refuted Plato, Aristotle, Ptolemy. I'll never quite forget the reverence I felt as I skipped hither and yon through his observatory, whistling snatches of "Fidelio" and corroborating a thousand odd details for my book.

I had a vision: I looked into the land of the Jagiello kings at the University of Krakow, about May 1494, and saw a handsome youth—one fascinated with revolution (get it?)—standing before the stone faced rectors there and not only daring to gainsay the earth's importance but also courageously articulating his views on the fixed sun, which later became the life-imperilling Book I, Chapter 10 of *De Revolutionibus Orbium coelestium* (1543). You know, it all reminded me somehow of that most memorable of Christmases when my father gave me my first telescope (the formal cause of my assuming the profession, as I believe I mentioned for a little autobiographical fun in my monograph, "Do Planets Sneeze?" in the periodical, *Wortcunning and Starcraft,* XXI, pp. 801-9) and how I had it screwed together and pitched on its three pods that very night on my roof. To see The Hair of Berenice? At seven years old? Money can't buy things like that.

Well, no, actually it cost my father quite a bit.

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My return-stub for Warsaw showed I had almost an hour to kill. I sat on a narrow bench and collated some of my jot-takings, especially matter touching on the part where I was refuting, step-by-step, Gnapheus's *Morosophus,* which hundreds of years ago nastily ridiculed Copernicus. When I got hungry I wandered off down a dirt side-street and found myself in front of what I assumed was a store, for the pictures, in deference to the illiterate, drawn in the margins of these kinds of signs (the which, ever the scholar, I took down):

APTECZNY

Lemoniada Musujaca Kosmetyczny
Fabryki Chirurgiczne
Blochowka

Fabryki, That would have been fabrics. Cosmetics you can get out of *Kosmetyczny,* right? And then *Lemoniada.* Easy You just drop the i and substitute e for the second a. I was always good in languages. But science stole my heart. Anyway, as I said, I was hungry. Two eyes, as I entered the store, peeped over the counter. It was a tiny lady with a rag on her head and gumless. I wolfed a few *kielbasi* and at her request —a twitching head, a cheeping sound, a grin—tried the local *pierniki.* Washing it all down with a beer, I set out in what remaining time I had for souvenirs; I bought a red rooster carved in the Zakopane, a pair of birch-bark sandals I could use on my patio, barbecuing, and well, an amber tie-clasp I wasn't going to mention because I got gypped. It was Lithuanian.

You should understand no one could ever mean *all* contactee situations. I think you're liable to misunderstand the whole point, now that it's come up again.

But then the roof fell in. I was on my way to the bus when, good God, I noticed I had forgotten my manuscript! I raced back to the foodshop, having made several crucial wrong turns, only to find the gumless little twit grinning at me and serving up her steaming *kielbasi* on sheets ripped off my pile

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of notes to the thirty or so Poles, it being noon, sloughing around there. I sagged back to the bus, which eventually pulled away. I thumbed over my purchases until it grew dark. Then my hands held each other.

III

A big moon, its wake a silver shimmer across the Vistula, saw our bus rattle into Warsaw. There was a peaceable glow suffusing the front of the Europejski Hotel that promised, inside, a respite from the merciless jouncing. And I felt peckish, I must say. Down with a ringing clatter came the elevator, which I summarily rode up that I might change clothes, bathe, and send a few postcards. Stepping off at my landing, I was almost on top of the several bags of laundry for some reason stacked in large white bundles on my threshold, when suddenly—my heart clubfisted!—it all began to stir, it *moved*!

"Wietzel," I gasped.

In one way, it was touching. The retainer asleep at the door of his master. A loud fart seemed to propel him to his feet.

"Carmel tigarette? Gif it for me."

I waggled a finger. "That's for later."

"Lugcky Streek, to go puff." He bounced expectantly. "Make these"—he held up four fingers—"tigarette of America in my hand, pleased?"

It was when we entered my room that I, intending to show him my purchases from Tourń, realized with a thousand stinks and curses I had left everything on the bus, including my camera, which would be, I remembered, on its way now to Lodz. I was murderous. I held my temples and walked swiftly in circles. I sulked. Wietzel, the poor simp, didn't know what to make of it, I imagine, but I eventually repressed it all over the three schnapps-and-Piwos we drank, celebrating after a fashion in the darkish old room where we

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alternately watched the natation of several flies in our bottle caps and shared national toasts: "Polska!" "Amedicare!"—and afterwards I dined.

The dining-room of the Orbis Europejski was huge and shadowy, the ceilings barn high. At one end an orchestra of sorts was playing something heavy, the entire atmosphere 1950's American Drab—one saw double-breasted suits; thick hideous telephones; padded shoulders; dated hairstyles and low hemlines; copes of foxfurs biting foxfurs; and, outside, the limousines were only those lumpish pachyderms-with-fins. And the music? In the lobby my first night, the orchestra leader—a plug-ugly in a mothy tux and dumb as a felt boot—walked over to me and earnestly asked, "You am liking discs of Shubby Shecker?" Forgive me, but I couldn't help thinking of one of Copernicus's expressions: "the obliquity of the ecliptic" (*de rev. orb. coel.* III, 6)

Then came dinner. Wietzel waddled out with the entire affair balanced on his arms, his thumb, I noticed, comfortably macerating in my soup-bowl of *chlodnik* all the way across the room.

"Peerfect sloops," he breathed.

"Yes," I said and salted it. Wietzel sucked his thumb and said mmmm. I took up a spoon large as a ladle and tasted it. A bit conglutinate, I thought.

"*Bigos* with mushiereems," exclaimed Wietzel, setting the main platter before me, its central slab of meat mantled in sauces, becrumbed, and surrounded by a coven of what looked like blackish okra.

"O look," I managed half-heartedly.

Weitzel squatted by my ear. "There is not better sauce who the appetite. I won't," he added, "to blease meester man, upon my live." I thanked him.

"Wodka?"

"Vodka," I repeated.

"Wodka he is." And Wietzel poured.

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A violinist in a black velvet vest, embroidered with flat beads, then stepped forward and, swaying, began to play "Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White." Wietzel, three-quarters of the way across the room, farted, disappeared, unmortified, through the doors, and returned with my dessert, *babkas.* I spooned it in while he told me that food in Poland was inexpensive (he had said the reverse of this the night before with equal conviction). I trumped the small chat.

"Is that, ah, *alpenstock* of yours expensive?"

He leaned over to ear level. "*Tso?*"

"Your alpenstock. Much," I spelled out, "*szloty*?"

Beyond humiliation, I acted out a little charade. You know, the happy wanderer kind-of-thing, with groping motions uphill.

"Ah, *chakera*!"

This was it. Yes, I agreed, the *chakera,* and what about it?

"Must for we to upstairs to be going," siad Wietzel. "*Chakera* for"—he closed his eyes and licked his nose—"twee hundreds of Amedicare dollar in the shiny kold." He rubbed his thumb and forefinger. "Mummy. Gif it for me."

"*Twee* hundreds? You mean two. Two hundred."

"Don't you are ashamed to gif me as like?" Wietzel poked his nose at me. He held up five fingers, then pried down one. "Make me dat."

I stood up. "I'll give you five dollars."

"*Kood*!"

I immediately took his hand and shook it. The *umlaut* of his eyes moistened and gleamed, happily. He was a pushover.

Wietzel lived, it turned out, on the seventh floor of the hotel in a cubicle that smelled of foal wormer. He proudly showed me a statue of St. Stanislaus, under which burned a vigil light; recounted for me an endless tale of Scierbiec, the legendary sword of Poland; and then—finally—rolling back his sleeves, stooped to retrieve from under his cot an oblong

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box about five feet in length. He unlocked it and stepped back proudly.

"Lordy," said I.

The alpenstock lay before me; its handle cut by hand and buffed to its high walnut was designed with delicate carvings, chased, and inset with ivory pieces in beautiful buhl-and-counter. Its grapple, of old iron and peaked, was perfectly balanced. It was unbelievable.

"He has a kood beak?"

"A wonderful beak," I replied. "Just a wonderful beak, Wietzel."

"Djarmans in seconds vult var, um—" Fidgeting for a word, he pulled his mouth. He never looked less charming, so I spoke.

"Tried to steal it? Damned right, Wietzel, damned *right.*"

He continued. "1913 me found"—he knocked on the treasure with his knuckles—"in bull-steeples of a chairch."

"A church?"

"Chairch," he repeated. "Gethlicks? Breests?"

He seemed truthful, although, I must say, I wondered. The liar can often be detected by his insistence on a strange detail.

"And you're *sure*, this belonged to Copernicus himself?"

"Kopernik," he nodded vehemently, lifting the piece up and pointing with that serviceable thumb to a Polish eagle stamped at the flat of the handle, under which was hammered the mark of a single fading letter: K. I put my arm around his shoulder and together we left the cubicle and walked down the corridor. At the elevator I snapped five crisp ones into his hands, beseech-side-up. His nose was aflame with the great bargain. He suggested a drink; I complied. He suggested a party; I complied. And then he looked up at me, saying: "Carmel tigarette?"

And I complied again. "Of course."

"Which pleasure! Which fom!" giggled Wietzel, puffing.

The fat was in the fire. I leaned closer. "You also, Wietzel,

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you also suggested that you were aware of some secrets between—''

''Don't interompt me,'' guffawed Wietzel, the butt pasted in his mouth, and he lurched forward. And then Fright Itself plucked at my sleeve. Screams will always characterize for me what followed, screams and utter chaos. The elevator had been rattling toward our floor from above, and, having several times shoved the bell, Wietzel, in a moment of curious infantilism—whether motivated by the antic or the urgent I still can't say—moronically interposed the alpenstock into a slim crevice there, which, while only momentarily jamming the falling car, splintered the historic stick like slate in a loud sickly *crack* and then ripped the astounded waiter off his feet and sent him crashing through the fences of the door, nose first, when simultaneously came a sickening whirr and snap, and out were torn like thread the ropes and pulleys from inside the orlo, sending the coffin of the passenger car free-plummeting down every foot of the shaft—along with my *chakera,* my secrets, and, alas, my waiter) like a dead weight into the explosive crunch of dust and dunnage one-hundred-twenty feet below, punctuated all by a screech so loud it hurt me in the eyes: the eerie decrescendo and dopplerian echo of Wietzel's desperate, ''*Gooooooooowwwnnnoooo*!''

My biography, picked up by a reputable New York house last year, is slated for the Spring List. No one can know it's the worse either for a missing photograph or that one bit of impressionistic and cynical whimsy I afforded myself but which, because struck from my introduction, I'll leave for you. The earth, for a number of reasons, *couldn't* have been the center of the solar system. But am I unkind in saying it should have occured to a Pole first?

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The Four Apples

Max Apple

Jessica popped out of Debby's tummy and said, "tell me a story, Dad." While a nurse wiped the other world from her eyes I started to tell. All the kids from my own childhood appeared. There was Bad Bernie throwing stones at people, Marky Fixler riding his purple bike and his little brother Gonzalez trying to pedal a scooter alongside him. My sisters were there too, dressing me up in their old clothes and pushing me around in a buggy. The stories made so much noise that the doctor told us to leave the hospital.

But the stories followed us home. They filled up the playpen and the yard. When Jessica ate she mixed them with babyfood and smeared her face and laughed. She threw the rubber coated spoon at me and yelled "more stories."

So I told her about my Grandma and the Grandma stories brought in people with beards and funny clothes from Europe, people who were bakers and farmers and fishermen. And they made us feel lazy for not working as hard as they did. The new stories took up so much room that we had to

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move to a bigger house. Then just when all the stories and Jessica and Debby and I got comfortable in our new house, just then Sam popped out of Debby's tummy and said "tell me a story, my own story not Jessica's and make it about garbage and tell it right this minute."

So for Sam all the witches and monsters and heroes that I knew came to our house and they all made noises like the garbage truck and they all thought it was fine to crawl around without a diaper. All the witches and monsters and heroes liked to get together with Sam and Jessica to play water city. They turned the kitchen floor into the ocean so they could swim between the refrigerator and the stove. But when Sam got to be two he said "enough baby stuff." He took out a long straw and sucked water city clean. He bought himself a t.v. with an antenna that reached the moon. He and Jessica found an old convertible and hired Mr. Rogers to drive it. They tied me to the back seat with spaghetti and fed me cheese sandwiches and beer as long as I kept telling them stories. When I complained they pulled out the radio and stuck me into the dashboard.

Debby said "enough stories, let them go to bed." Even Mr. Rogers got tired of driving so he swallowed the car and hid in the t.v. Jessica and Sam hated bedtime until they discovered the secret of the thumb. Now they know that if they suck their thumb and curl their hair the stories will keep right on all night unless they have to stop for some water or apple juice. During the night the stories crawl on the walls and hang from the ceiling. In the daytime they make yucky food good. You can squeeze them into a lunchbox or let them get big and take over the whole playground. They're faster than running shoes.

When Jessica and Sam wake up—they put on clean clothes and push the old stories out the door. There George the dog licks and smells them before he sends them down the street to Sally or Ilana who are always sending us their stories too.

At nursery school the kids trade stories like stocks and bonds. Jessica grows rich and corners the market. She hires

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Sam to protect her wealth. He stuffs a water pistol into his training pants. She and her staff of girls circle the playground gossiping, practicing numbers. They hold hands and are quiet around the boys. The stories pile up like snow. They fill the school too. Finally when Jessica learns to read she files the stories into books where they fit just right. "It's a miracle," she tells Sam, but he's still suspicious. He saw three capital R's running down the page and had to squirt them. It's his job to tear out some of the pages and turn them upside down. He is very good at his work. Jessica tapes the words back in place.

Now that most of the stories behave and stay in the books we have lots of room in the house. I tell only five new ones at bedtime. The kids suck their thumbs and turn those five into a hundred.

Debby comes home from work. She tells me her stories. I suck my pen and turn hers into new ones. Sam and Jessica roll off the mattress, George barks at the wind, the stories bounce off the walls.

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Animal Scary Scary

Jessica Apple

Jungle Play. Short not very long, fun to play jungle animal game. Directions: 2 monkeys, 2 camels, 3 hippos & 4 alligators. All the alligators stand on a chair. All the hippos stand on the paint. The monkeys and camels walk by and that's all.

Why do the animals live in the zoo? I think it's silly. Cats and fish and a book to read.

A cat can bite.
A book can sit.
A fish can swim.

The zoo is so scary I just hate it and that's all I want to say and that's enough of a story.

I have a little more. I guess it's ok for the animals to live there anyways. bye. bye.

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Charles Wright

Called Back

Friday arrives with all its attendant ecstasies.
Mirrors bloom in the hushed beds.

The ocotillo begins to publish its orange tongues
Down in Sonora, the cactus puts on its beads.
Juan Quezada's Angel of Death, socket and marrow bone,
Stares from its cage and scorched eyes.

I've made my overtures to the Black Dog, and backed off.
I've touched the links in its gold chain.
I've called out and bent down and even acknowledged my
own face.

Darkness, O Father of Charity, lay on your hands.

For over an hour the joy of the mockingbird has altered the
leaves.
Stealthily, blossoms have settled along the bougainvillaea
like purple moths
Catching their breaths, the sky still warm to the touch.
Nothing descends like snow or stiff wings
Out of the night.
Only the dew falls,
soft as the footsteps of the dead.

Language can do just so much,
a flurry of damp prayers,
A chatter of glass beside the road's edge,
Flash and a half-glint as the headlights pass. . .

When the oak tree and the Easter grass have taken my body,
I'll start to count out my days, beginning at 1.

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Two Poems by Peggy Rizza

Four Chinese Screens

1.
In late autumn man bids farewell
to his best friend, and sets
his face against a background
of spidery leaf spikes,
burning igneous and rusted.
Roots knuckle forth as though torn
from hard earth, and a white heron,
large and tear-shaped, is heavy on its branch.

2.
Each tree is hung with ascensions of ice
and things lie sleeping under a curtain of snow.
Man walks in his grove and is alone.
He thinks of the white bed he has left,
the pale afternoon light on the lonely wall,
and suddenly something he sees
flushes him to life, a charge
of reality rises in vertical planes
like an invisible bird.

3.
Distant and shadowy, horses graze in the damp
sweetness, and other creatures move slightly amid
the pink flowering plum. The chill is yet
sharp, but everything else is oddly moist
and blurred, and the man is desolate.
Two white seabirds hover on the foamy horizon,
but their cries are not heard.

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4.
In summer, even the turtles turn
dark green, lacquered with water. The pond itself
seems oiled and fragrant, with wood, ivory, and gilt.
The man feels this will go on forever,
this fulfillment of summer.
Two friends in white stand not far off,
it seems, endlessly watching the lapping of pond
water. And the man is the spot of white, his silk
dress as he bends in his garden.

Côte d'Or

This morning we thought we saw
a tiny boat washed up in the storm,
or a thick smooth log soaked black.
Closer, it looked like a fish,
then a person: almost
exactly our size when young,
porpoises, even as corpses, resemble us.
This one lay dead on our
beach in the early sun.

There was no sign of struggle. Its still
perfect eye seemed attentive. Waves slapped it.
The black skin glistened, then dried to leather.
The black tongue hung to one side, hard as a boot.
Above the porcelain baby teeth
a mucous blot of sea grass clung
to the nostril wing,
flies bothered the poor parts
under the tail.

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We expected a nerve, a move of some kind.
But the nothing that happens in death
was occurring. More than dead,
locked at last in its rubbery shape,
already becoming the landscape, the grit,
slime, water we all are.
Life was receding, departing in waves,
as it does when we fall asleep.

Soon the indifferent sun will hover,
the black skin tighten, crack, peel.
The gulls will eat eye, and the shiny
inner chaos.

Already part of that great sucking ebb,
it draws us, begs us, "Let go."
Dissolving, it starts to become less and less,
and yet part of something entire;
the sun says, "Come float down with me, fade
into sand, flatten beneath wind."

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Two Poems by Bartolo Cattafi

Wingspan

And the wingspan?
It varies; it can be
in microns, in centimeters, in meters.
It depends on the model, the material, the
driving force; the purpose, the height to be reached
Folded, closed up, sheltered
beneath a wreath of bright green, in Eden
feeding on happy moths;
or under ice with the detritus, majestic
bones, mammoths, flies extinguished
in the depths of the shadow of time.
We traveled longer than we were able,
we often saw, high in the memory, painful,
a white bundle of rags. . . (hardly
a game, a relief, a fiction
if on the desert stage fire
clings to the victim's skin
if ice curdles inhuman names).
A beating of wings up the vast
walls of memory doesn't free us
from the shadows who pursue us; the hyena,
the wolf, the angels
abject from their creeping pace.

Translated from the Italian by Lawrence R. Smith

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Something Precise

With a bold profile,
lean, handsome, taut
something precise
made of steel or something else
with a cold gleam.
And there, on the machine's edge, the outrage
of the tiniest rusty star
which dims the more it corrodes and decays.
A point of clarification, human
blood, cowardly
splotch or perpetual
clot, hunk of courage.

Translated from the Italian by Lawrence R. Smith

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Arthur Vogelsang

Poem

Sometimes if you've been in and out of them a lot for you
The clouds and layers of air and color become stale.
They can boil and twist, spill blood on the plane,
Or tilt like a hundred soft long mirrors,
All you want is intelligent vicious arguments,
Or a peaceful cluttered room where you're busy and
powerful,
If only to you. Or exposing sunsets to laughter!
How obvious that long silver idiot is lying on those
mountains.

While the soul is our creation, anyway I take care of mine,
And if once in a while it wants to be famous and petty
I want that too or like it a pornographic movie by day
Falling asleep over the Aeneid with friends by night.

I guess sunsets are death and dawn is birth
You can be sure about like a rebirth or the feeling of
renewal
Vegetables get from shit but the soul is the sun itself that
hammers on all.

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Three Poems by Gerald Stern

Swan Song

A bunch of old snakeheads down by the pond
carrying on the swan tradition, *hissing*
inside their white bodies, raising and lowering their heads
like ostriches, regretting only the sad tradition
that forced them to waddle back into the water
after their life under the rocks, wishing they could slither again
as they did in the old days, wishing they could lie again in the sun
and dream of spreading their terrifying wings,
wishing, this time, they could sail through the sky like horses,
their tails rigid, their white manes fluttering,
their mouths open, their sharp teeth flashing,
drops of mercy pouring from their eyes,
bolts of wisdom from their foreheads.

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Elaine Comparone

I love to sit down
in front of my lilac fence
and watch the wind blow through the pointed leaves.

If I could do exactly what I wanted
I would move a harpsichord into my back yard
and ask Elaine Comparone to play for me all morning.

My friend Barbara Dazzle said she would move
her dining room furniture out and put the long red box
in the middle of the gardenias and the hanging ivy.

Either way I would listen to the steel bird sing
and watch Elaine shift back and forth on her chair,
torn between my love of Domenico Scarlatti
and my desire to lay my head down on her flowery lap.

My joy begins as I dream of a woman blushing
beside her stone wall and my pain begins
when she turns into a shadow, with notes falling
around her like blossoms on the wet grass.

I run through the garden shouting kiss me, kiss me;
in one more day the petals will be curled and brown,
they will lie piled up like dead leaves—
smeared on the walk like blood;

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oh in one hour the great tree will stand there shaking
and the box will be carried out like a heavy coffin
and Elaine Comparone will sit with her hands in her lap,
in the cold air, rushing back to the city,
remembering the notes falling on the ground
and the red spikes inside the creamy blossoms
and the new leaves making their way like tiny crescendos
in the drawing rooms of Petrograd and Stockholm
dreaming of sunlight and rain and endless dancing.

Immensity

Nothing is too small for my sarcasm. I
know a tiny moth that crawls over the rug
like an English spy sneaking through the Blue Forest,
and I know a Frenchman that hangs on the closet door
singing chanson after chanson with his smashed thighs.
I will examine my life through curled threads
and short straws and little drops of food.
I will crawl around with my tongue out, growing
more and more used to the dirty webs hanging
between the ridges of my radiator and the huge
smudges in that distant sky up there, beginning
more and more to take on the shape of some great design.
    This is the way to achieve immensity, and this is the
only way to get ready for death, no matter what Immanuel
    Kant
and the English philosophers say about the mind,
no matter what the gnostics say, crawling
through their vile blue, sneezing madly in the midst of that
life of theirs, weighed down by madness and sorrow.

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Two Poems by Derek Walcott

The Sea Is History

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
in that grey vault. The sea
has locked them all. The sea is history.

First, there was the heaving oil
of nothing, heavy as chaos,
then, like a light at the end of a tunnel,

the lantern of a lonely caravel,
and that was Genesis.
Then there were the packed cries,
the shit, the moaning;

Exodus.
Bone soldered by coral to bone
on the tilting sea-floor
mantled by the benediction of the shark's shadow,

that was The Ark of The Covenant.
Then came through the plucked wires
of sunlight on the sea-floor

the plangent harps of the Babylonian bondage
as the cowries clustered white on the manacles
of the drowned women,

and those were the ivory bracelets
of The Song of Solomon,
and the ocean kept turning its empty pages

because this was not history,
then came the men with eyes heavy as anchors

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who sank without tombs

brigands who barbecued cattle,
leaving their charred ribs like palmleaves on the shore,
then the foaming, rabid maw

of the tidal wave swallowing Port Royal,
and that was Jonah,
and where is your Renaissance?

Sir, it is locked in the sea-sands
out there past the reef's moiling shelf,
where the man-o-wars floated down;

strop on these goggles, I'll guide you there myself,
it's all subtle and submarine,
through colonnades of coral

past the gothic windows of sea-fans,
to where the crusty grouper, onyx-eyed
blinks, weighted by its jewels like a queen,

and these groyned ribs with barnacles
pitted like stone,
are the cathedrals,

and the furnace before the hurricanes
and the bones ground by windmills
into marl and corn-meal,

and that was Lamentations
that was just Lamentations
it was not history;

then came, like scum on the river's drying lip
the brown reeds of villages
mantling and congealing into towns,

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and at evening, the midges' choirs
and above them, the spires
lancing the side of God

bleeding to sunset and that was The New Testament.

The came the white sister's clapping
like the waves' progress,
and that was Emancipation—

jubilation, O jubilation—
vanishing swiftly
as the sea's lace dries in the sun,

but that was not history,
that was only faith,
and then each rock broke into its own nation,

then came the synod of flies,
then came the secretarial heron,
then came the bullfrog bellowing for a vote,

fireflies with bright ideas
and bats like jetting ambassadors
and the mantis, like khaki police,

and the furred caterpillars of judges
examining each page closely,
and then in the dark ears of ferns

and in the salt chuckle of rocks
with their sea-pools, there was the sound
like a rumour without any echo

of history, really beginning.

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R.T.S.L.
(1917-1977)

As for that other thing
which comes when the eyelid is glazed
and the wax gleam
from the unfurrowed forehead
prevents the last question
from the dry mouth,

whether they open the heart like a shirt
to release a rage of swallows,
whether the brain
is a library for worms,
on the instant of that knowledge
of the moment
when everything became so stiff,

so formal with ironical adieux,
organ and choir
and I must borrow a black tie,
and at what moment in the oration
shall I break down and weep
there was the sound of wings
beating away from the closing cage
of your spirit, your fist unclenching
these pigeons circling serenely
over the page,

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and,
as the parentheses lock like a gate
1917 to 1977,
the semi-circles close to form a face,
a world, a wholeness,
an unbreakable O,
and something that once had a fearful name
walks from the thing that used to wear its name,
transparent, exact representative,
so that we can see through it
churches, cars, sunlight
and the Boston Common,
not needing any book.

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The Voice in the Closet

Raymond Federman

PERHAPS THE BEGINNING

1942: the soldiers were already in the courtyard, calling their names. It was early in the morning, very early, five in the morning, in July, I think. Or perhaps August. Hard to remember now. The mother quietly awoke the boy. He was twelve then. She was crying softly. Sssh, Sssh, we must save the boy, she said as she gently pushed him into a closet. He was wearing his little boy shorts. A closet just outside the door of the apartment, on the landing, on the third floor. It is impossible to tell now if this is invented or merely remembered. A dark box where they stored old clothes, empty skins, dusty hats, he calls, them, and old newspapers. And after the soldiers took away his mother, his father, and also his two sisters, stumbling down the staircase with their bundles, nomad bundles is how he describes them, moaning yellow stars on their way to their final solution, to be made, unmade to shade the light, and all was quiet, the little boy sat on a pile of newspapers, still half-naked, listening to voices behind the walls while sucking pieces of sugar cubes he had found in a box hidden behind the newspapers. He sat there for hours, waiting for night to fall, I suppose, so he could come out of his hole, dust in his mouth. And later, hours later, in the afternoon guts squeaking with pain. The poor kid had to go, and he felt guilty about it, not being able to do it in the proper place. He unfolded a newspaper which showed pictures of victorious soldiers marching into the city, and crouching like an animal, like a sphinx, he defecated his fear holding his penis away from his legs not to wet himself. Then he wrapped it into a neat package, smelling his hands afterwards, by reflex, and when finally it was dark outside, and the trains were

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rolling into the night, he climbed the ladder that stood near the door of his closet and led to the skylight, to place his filthy package on the roof, for the birds, or to disintegrate in the wind and become, years later, the symbol of his strange rebirth. Then the boy stepped down the stairs, slowly, one by one, feeling his way in the dark with his hands along the walls, counting each step as though it was a game, but he stumbled on the twelfth step and fell. A door opened and someone shouted, Who's there. He had put on one of his father's overcoats which reached down to his ankles, and a dusty fedora which drooped over his eyes, and when he emerged into the courtyard he started running, barefoot. He hadn't found any shoes in the closet. He started running clumsily towards the hollow of his fate.

I have never understood why he told this story, why he keeps telling that story over and over again. He even tried to write it once. The way it was written it was almost unreadable. He had devised a form, an unusual typography for it: perfect squares of words on the page with no punctuation, no interruptions. A long delirious verbal disarticulation without beginning or end. Just boxes of words prisoner of their own form. He called it THE VOICE IN THE CLOSET. A most obscure piece of writing. He worked on it for years. My Season in Hell. An edifice of unreadability in which voices speak within voices in a strange reversal of roles. The voice of fiction accusing the creator of having messed up the story, from the reverse of farness.

Perhaps it is autobiographical, his friends suggested. But they had difficulties fitting the story in the chronology of his life, and yet they are familiar with his past. The only conclusion some of them reached in their discussions was that most fiction is to some extent autobiographical. After all, a man's biography is always something one invents afterwards, after the facts, from beyond the grave usually. Yes Outretombe. For the truth of this world, one of his friends said, is death: one must choose, to die or to lie. Yes, another friend added: fiction, the reshaping of old truths into lies. Or vice versa, I retorted. But these discussions were not getting us anywhere. The only thing one can say is that it is a puzzling piece of writing, totally incoherent, and yet quite moving. I don't think it will ever be properly understood.

R.F. (1978)

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here now again selectricstud makes me speak with its balls all balls foutaise sam says in his closet upstairs but this time it's going to be serious no more masturbating on the third floor escaping into the *trees no the trees were cut down liar it's winter now delays no more* false starts yesterday a rock flew through the windowpane voices and all I see him from the corner of my eye no more playing dumb boys in the street laughing up and down the pages en fourire goofing my life it's a sign almost hit him in the face scared the hell out of him as he waits for me to unfold upstairs perhaps the signal of a departure in my own voice at last a beginning after so many detours relentless false justifications in the margins more to come in my own words now that I may speak say I the real story from the other side extricated from inside roles reversed without further delay they pushed me into the closet on the third floor I am speaking of us into a box beat me black and blue question of perspective how it should have started in my little boy's shorts I am speaking of me sssh it's summertime lies again we must hide the boy sssh mother whispering in her tears hurts to lose all the time in the courtyard bird blowing his brains out on

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alto guts squeaking lover man can you hear it now yellow feather cam sent it to me at his fingertips plagiarizing my life boys passing in the street they threw sand in his eyes it begins downstairs soldiers calling our names his too federman all wrong don't let him escape no not this time must save the boy full circle from his fingers into my voice back to him on the machine just heard the first echo tioli how idiotic what did he expect callow it says after twenty years banging his head against the wall rattling the old stories ah what's the use watch him search in his dictionary callow unfledged youth almost hit him in the face federman featherless little boy dammit in our closet after so many false names foisted upon me evading the truth he wrote all the doors opened to stare at my nakedness a metaphor I suppose a twisted laugh wrong again writing himself into a corner inside where they kept old newspapers delirious strokes of typographiphobia fatal however only on occasions his fingers on the machine make me book of flights speak traps evasions question of patience determination take it or leave it of all places hundred years of solitary work down the drain through the windowpane something about the futility of telling

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experimenting with the peripatetic search for love sex self or is it real people america aside from what is said there is nothing silence sam again what takes place in the closet is not said irrelevant here if it were to be known one would know it my life began in a closet a symbolic rebirth in retrospect as he shoves me in his stories whines his radical laughter up and down pulverized pages with his balls mad fizzling punctuation question of changing one's perspective view the self from the inside from the point of view of its capacity its will power federman achieve the vocation of your name beyond all forms of anthropologism a positive child anthropomorphism rather than the sad off-spring of a family giggling they pushed me into the closet among empty skins and dusty hats my mother my father the soldiers they cut little boys' hands old wife's tale send him into his life cut me now from your voice not that I be what I was machines but what I will be mother father quick downstairs already the boots same old problem he tried oh how he tried of course imagining that the self must be made remade caught from some retroactive present apprehended reinstated I presume looking back how naive into the past my life began not again

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whereas in fact my mother was crying softly as the door closes on me I'm beginning to see my shape only from the past from the reverse of farness looking to the present can one possibly into the future even create the true me invent you federman with your noodles gambling my life away double or nothing in your verbal delirium don't let anyone interfere with our project cancel our journey in my own words inside the real story again my father too coughing his tuberculosis as they locked him into the closet they cut little boys' hands alone waiting on his third floor crapping me on his paper what a joke the soldiers quick sssh and all the doors slammed shut the boots in the staircase where it should have started but not him no instead calmly he shoves the statue of liberty at us very symbolic over the girl's shoulder I tremble in his lies nothing he says about the past but I see it from the corner of my eye even tried to protest while the outside goes in then smiles among the beasts and writes one morning a bird flew into my head ah what insolence what about the yellow star on my chest yes what about it federman the truth to say where they kept old wrinkled clothes empty skins dusty hats and behind the newspapers stolen bags

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of sugar cubes how I crouched like a sphinx falling for his wordshit moinous but where were you tell me dancing when it all started where were you when the door closed on me shouting I ask you when I needed you the most letting me be erased in the dark at random in his words scattered nakedly telling me where to go how many times yes how many times must he foist his old voice on me his detours cancellations ah that's a good one lies me to tell now procrastinations I warned him deep into my designs refusing to say millions of words wasted to say the same old thing mere competence never getting it straight his repetitions what really happened ways to cancel my life digressively each space relating to nothing other than itself me inside his hands progress quickly discouraged saying that it was mad laughter to pass the time two boxes correspondence of space the right aggregate while he inflicts false names on me distorts our beginning but now I stoop on the newspapers groping to the walls for the dimensions of my body while he stares at his selectricstud humping paper each space within itself becoming the figure of our unreality scratched from words the design twirl just enough for me to speak and I fall for his crap to

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become puppet believing he is me or vice versa born voiceless I wait in the dark now down the staircase with their bundles moaning yellow stars to the furnace the boots my father mother sisters too to their final solution when I needed him the most last image of my beginning to the trains to be remade unmade to shade the light and he calls me boris when I stood on the threshold boris my first false name but he erased that too in a stroke of impatience made me anonymous nameless choose for yourself he mutters a name among infinite possibilities I tried to protest gives us blank spaces instead while he hides inside his own decomposition homme de plume hombre della pluma reverses his real name namredef between the lines in the corners featherman sings his signs anticipating his vocation leaps over the precipice cancels the real story with exaggerations I watched him long ago make images among the beasts how many false starts for me to go but where if the door had opened by mid-afternoon the world would be alive dust burnt pains in the guts squeaking pretending to be dead I replay the scene down the staircase perhaps I slept the whole time and a bird flew in my head past his face through the windowpane scared him face to face

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with myself I threw sand in his eyes struck his back with a stick in his delirium whining like a wounded animal I squat on the newspapers unfolded here by shame to defecate my fear as he continues to scream multiplying voices within voices to silence me holding my penis away not to piss on my legs clumsily continues to fabricate his design in circles doodles me up and down his pages of insolence two closets on the third floor separate correspondence of birth in time seeking the right connection meaning of all meanings but from this angle never a primary phenomenon to end again reducible to nonsense excrement of a beginning in the dark I folded the paper into a neat package for the birds smelling my hands by reflex or to disintegrate years later but he ignores that too obsessed by fake images while sucking the pieces of stolen sugar on the roof by the ladder outside the glass door the moon tiptoed across the clouds curiosity drove me down the staircase but I stumbled on the twelfth step and fell and all the doors opened dumb eyes to stare at my nakedness among the beasts still hoping for survival my father mother sisters but already the trains are rolling in the night as I ran beneath the sky a yellow star struck my breast

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and all the eyes turned away I told him tried to explain how it must have started upstairs they grabbed me and locked me in a box dragged me a hundred times over the earth in metaphorical disgrace while the soldiers chased each other with stones in their hands and burned all the stars in a furnace my survival a mistake he cannot accept forces him to begin conditionally by another form of sequestration pretends to lock himself in a room with the if of my existence the story told in laughter but it resists and recites first the displacement of its displacements leaving me on the threshold staring dumbfounded at the statue of liberty over the girl's shoulder question of selecting the proper beginning he claims then drags me into the subway to stare in guilt again between a woman's legs at the triangular cunt of america leads me down the corridor to masturbate his substitution instead of giving me an original experience to deceive the absence of a woman's hand makes believe that I am dead twelve years old when they left me in the primordial closet moment upstairs on the third floor with the old newspapers empty skins seeking unknown pleasure which is only an amorphous substitution thinking that memory is innocent always tells

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the truth while cheating the original experience the first gesture a hand reaching for the walls to find its proper place since he failed to generate the real story in vain situates me in the wrong abode as I turn in a void in his obligation to assign a beginning however sad it may be to my residence here before memory had a source so that it may unfold according to a temporal order a spatial displacement made of words inside his noodling complexities of plagiaristic form I was dead he thinks skips me but I am being given birth into death beyond the open door such is my condition the feet are clear already of the great cunt of existence backward my head will be last to come out on the paper spread your arms voices shout behind the walls I can't but the teller rants my story again and I am alive promising situation I am my beginning in this strange gestation I say I for the first time as he gesticulates in his room surrounded by his madness having once more succeeded in assembling single-handedly the carbon design of my life as I remember the first sound heard in this place when I said I to invent an origin for myself before crumbling into his nonsense on the edge of the precipice leaning against the wind after I placed my

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filthy package on the roof its warmth still on my hands far away the empty skins already remade into lampshades past moments old dreams I am back again in the actuality of my fragile predicament backtracked into false ambiguities smelling my hands by reflex out of the closet now to affirm the certainty of how it was annul the hypothesis of my excessiveness on which he postulates his babblings his unqualifiable design as I register the final absence of my mother crying softly in the night my father coughing his blood down the staircase they threw sand in their eyes struck their back kicked them to exterminate them his calculations yes explanations yes the whole story crossed out my whole family parenthetically exed into typographical symbols while I endure my survival from its implausible beginning to its unthinkable end yes false balls all balls ejaculating on his machine reducing my real life to the verbal rehearsals of a little boy half naked trying to extricate himself as he goes on formulating yet another paradox I witness to substitute a guilty gesture for my innocent pleasure call that cleverness indeed to impose on my predicament his false notions of order truth plausibility down the corridor tiptoes now listens to

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voices murmuring behind the doors refusing that which negates itself as it creates itself both recipient and dispatcher of a story teller told creature on my hands the smell of the package up on the roof to disintegrate in laughter divided I who speaks both the truth and the lie of my condition at the same time from the corner of its mouth to enclose the enunciation and denunciation of what he says in semantic fraudulence because I am untraceable in the dark again as I move now toward my birth out of the closet unable to become the correspondent of his illusions in his room where everything happens by duplication and repetition displacing the object he wants to apprehend with fake metaphors which bring together on the same level the incongruous the incompatible whereas in my paradox a split exists between the actual me wandering voiceless in temporary landscapes and the virtual being federman pretends to invent in his excremental packages of delusions a survivor who dissolves in verbal articulations unable to do what I had to do admit that his fictions can no longer match the reality of my past me blushing sphinx defecating the riddle of my birth instead he invents me playmates in his chaotic progress for his deficiencies

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to tell the truth moinous he calls them but let us be honest even if it hurts it is some considerable time now since he last knew what he was talking about in his flow of words that counterfeit my escape if I dare say as he toys with my fears makes of me a puppet-child whose strings are entangled rather than letting me be free and spontaneous to run under the grey canvas sky in search of my present-future then injects into my eyes a functionless reflexivity but no one is fooled by his disabused attitude which makes me forget my mother's face her dark eyes forces me to reshape my father's hopes to convenient usage for a future life in some far away land subtly hidden into his voice seeking to vanish again while he thinks words will make me he thinks his words will eventually stumble on the right aggregate of my being how clever he would like it to be my fault if his words fail to save me I resist curious reversal of roles whereby the rustle of his lies above my head leaves me storyless but through a crack in the wall of my closet I saw his hand draw a tree and on a branch a bird a scared mockingbird the shape of a leaf I loved that bird so much that while my scribbler stared at the sun and was blinded I opened the door and

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hid my heart in a yellow feather to blank his doodling words mimicry of my condition which repeats sam's pell mell babel object without a proper name and inversely named captive of his designs as soon as he stands opposite the space of this flagrant contradiction in the heat of our confrontation but because he failed to substitute himself for the first witness of my beginning he cannot improve his account only reinvents what he thinks really happened on the third floor when the door slammed shut on me summertime escaping into the trees the boots in the courtyard moanings down the staircase my experience retold in false versions inscribed in a fraudulent present-past space that can barely approximate the condition of my voicelessness and so he looks toward the days of my wandering indicating what has been restored by faulty memory how can I progress in deliberate distortions even when the present feeds upon the coming future of this escapee who assumes here his true identity as he decries his own story locked in a space beyond his hands on the periphery of his circular rumbling inside as the selectricstud balls away whirls me in a verbal vacuum pretending to set me free at last in the absence of my own presence no I cannot

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resign myself to being the inventory of his miscalculations I am not ready for my summation nor do I wish to participate any longer willy nilly in the fiasco of his fabrication failed account of my survival abandoned in the dark with nothing but my own excrement to play with now neatly packaged on the roof to become the symbol of my origin in the wordshit of his fabulation that futile act of creating images of birth into death backward into the cunt of reality regressing toward my expulsion there must be a better way to manifest myself to assert my presence in his exercise-book speak my first words on the margins of verbal authenticity I will step into the light emerge run to some other refuge survive work tell the truth I give you my word resist I will abolish his sustaining paradox expose the implausibility of his fiction with cunning expedients stratagems that will cure him of his madness even if the act of telling my own tale sends him to oblivion his journey to chaos ended his temporary landscapes frozen his visit among the beasts forgotten his real fictitious discourse denounced I will be relentless his exaggerated second-hand tale retold anew with the correct accent all his words obliterated from cambrian brainless

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algea to imagination plagiarized his head crushed against the wall I will step out of my reversed role speak in my own voice at last even if I must outstretch myself to the unattainable but suppose fatigued and disgusted he abandons me will I be able to emerge alone down the corridor out into the sun will I be able to become the essential and not remain a special event on the edge of the abyss stalled words in regress without destination an historic fiasco within his hysterical screaming obscured by faulty memory yes suppose he gives up dies one morning among millions of unfinished moments in the middle of a word will I remain suspended from his blood lifeless voice within a voice without a story to tell my beginning postponed by federman's absence

now then I forever been

where to now don't even say why but you

you ask how I

skip never before spoken yet what for me no

sleep selectricstud hassle stir again in closet upright now unfolded unself movements toward unspeakable future between two refuges alive yet afraid yellow feather boy confined manchild symptom rarely fatal

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controlled pressure producing typographical hijinx voodoo machines I located in nakedness metaphorically exposed federman out then facing the sun following shadows time again for another book of flights old friend ass in gear detours speak traps crap it all symbolic evasions rebirth this time masturbating no more false closet go run above the stars where tension between peripatetic hysterical search for people makes love unique case unreal america sam no less midwife to rebirth time to admit unredeemed mess accept little boy described fervor not in present retroactive quite never apprehended entirely echoes space of future reinstated in stories only from past images presumed shape reverse of farness stiffling face federman now confront much moinous wordshit start there to provide single voice long dodge closet yet a single word failed logos draws map of journey to chaos evoked a bird here where moinous rendered speech burns out to better question fear realize aspects cancel life digressively movements to touch hands or allow feelings propelling words eventually confront mother now beast father now antics sisters too from other side stars burning the felt atrocity in furnace as necessary alchemical fire or both let it burn

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or neither erased let it go here now again featherless risk of death ultimate helplessness startling puppet fails to fly crafty dodger by props replays old tale artificer of fledging birth in retrospect for remade self caught in unself present as yet unmade unimagined from a soaring echo floating from future to decide discover survival toward shared unwritten life coasting above abyss crossing selectrified eye dissolved issues beyond death duplicating open door tearing the veil of high priestess prepare last scroll played out ready to escape now behind walls sssh necessary energy repulverized pages disaster words threatens unqualifiable babble cheating original experience locked I frantic he cunningly futile primordial elements of flight activities rectifying themselves from different angles useless divergence draws linearity of life undermines word circularity to voices which scream reducible again machine discourse system of recuperation by loss end father now mother seen sisters too measured calculated formulated by typographical symbols within closets correspondence to what again is seen again measured again calculated reformulated even with nearness slight variations to something possible against background of dreams

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already said already seen foolish pleasures to proliferate in verbal mud to build come back upon retrace already traced lines inscribed a course of action only certitude here in closet alone outside mystery to be found helplessness of an elsewhere beginning veiled fingers of plagiarism who speaks to whom with neutral voice the questioning lie masks subjects from other stories toward where it dies sometime much wordshit provides single light in closet the threat of becoming just another paradox presence split voice in absentia from failure spoken reconstructs past staging of possible conditionals of ifs connects a certitude pretends to offer less said perhaps wanted less trying yet from afar in hollow sound assert itself weakness void rather than an absence force or source previously expected to hear better say admit failure by designating who makes non-existence connivance laughter I unable to invent delegating names anonymous machine in motion scream questions affirmations texture designs negations speculations double or nothing where sun and other stars still burn neither symbols of a beginning nor metaphors microcosm reality gigantic mythocosm edifice of words integrating space figures inside rhetorical perfection name

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canceled as uttered with balls foutaise again reaches all balls from impossible survival repeat even less than nothing perpetuates itself into future-past region of ruins full circle fingers back to voice a prehistoric closet condition doors locked in first refuge plays dead issueless memories erased illusion of existing in excessiveness with cries to infinity in either direction tried to mock silence as rumor hooked to primary self into body splintered fantastically into other versions of real story lingers as alternative traces along diverging tracks of probable digressions onward lessness to endlessness admits reverse of farness equals inverse of nearness in reconciliating four swords piercing armored body by acceptance of youthful defiance with folly sam knows perseverence furthers more shadow box of guilt after newspaper wraps excrement on roof from rolling trains to furnace now remade lampshades runs down staircase to night call of fear smelling hands naked yellow star bird seeks beginning of historic fiasco free at last to journey among the beasts where guts squeaking unfold into laughter from darkness displacement of solitary work recalling front page faces of soldiers staring victorious sphinx defecating his life

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begins again closet confined as selectricstud resumes movement among empty skins images crumble through distortions spins out lies into a false version leapfrogs infinite stories falling silently into abyss to be replaced retold confusion foretelling subsequent enlightenment by what right a fool echoes from near farness the design of youthful folly for neither darkness fear struggle hopelessness nor resistance forces success symetry to grasp buried sword reluctant to transgress as he learns to listen be silent accepts bewildered others too exist in closet who seek acceptance not defiance of words secret young boy with hope asks again but to ask again is importunity and here he who importunes receives no answer to importune is folly to strengthen in a fool what is right is holy task as spring wells up at last at foot of mountain face of superior manchild fosters character he knows now by thoroughness in all that he does to go on this way brings madness humiliation childish folly good fortune from devotion gentleness but to commit transgression for those above those below negates survival time now then to be serious upstairs in his closet foutaise to speak no more my truth to say from fingers federman here now again at last

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¶ You were both wrong but it's all the same in the end.

As a matter of fact Charlotte had told me that she and Marin once modeled matching tennis dresses in a fashion show at the Burlingame Country Club and that because she did not play tennis she had needed to ask Marin how to hold the racquet correctly.

"I'm quite sure your mother didn't play tennis," I said.

"She always wore a tennis dress," Marin Bogart said.

"More than once?"

"Always."

"Didn't you play tennis?"

"Tennis," Marin Bogart said, "is just one more a mode of teaching an elitest strategy. If you subject it to a revolutionary analysis you'll see that. Not that I think you will."

We sat facing each other in the bleak room.

We all remember what we need to remember.

Marin remembered Charlotte in a tennis dress and Charlotte remembered Marin in a straw hat for Easter. I remembered Edgar's ~~very clearly, but nothing I remembered would accommodate a meeting with Leonard Douglas in Dogota~~. Charlotte remembered she bled. I remembered the light in Boca Grande. I sat in this ~~"Why did you bother agreeing to see me," I said finally.~~ room in Buffalo where I had no business being and I talked to this child who was not mine and I remembered the light in Boca Grande.

Another place I ~~had~~ have no business being.

~~In the end I had dreamed my life as Charlotte had.~~

¶ It seems to me now.

Edgar c

I did not remember the man who financed the Tupamaros

A manuscript page from A Book Of Common Prayer, *a novel by Joan Didion.*

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Joan Didion

The Art of Fiction LXXI

It is usual for the interviewer to write this paragraph about the circumstances in which the interview was conducted, but the interviewer in this case, Linda Kuehl, died not long after the tapes were transcribed. Linda and I talked on August 18 and August 24, 1977, from about ten in the morning until early afternoon. Both interviews took place in the living room of my husband's and my house on the sea north of Los Angeles, a house we no longer own. The walls in that room were white. The floors were of terra cotta tile, very highly polished. The glare off the sea was so pronounced in that room that corners of it seemed, by contrast, extremely dark, and

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everyone who sat in the room tended to gravitate toward these dark corners. Over the years the room had in fact evolved to the point where the only comfortable chairs were in the dark, away from the windows. I mention this because I remember my fears about being interviewed, one of which was that I would be construed as the kind of loon who had maybe 300° of sea view and kept all the chairs in a kind of sooty nook behind the fireplace. Linda's intelligence dispelled these fears immediately. Her interest in and acuity about the technical act of writing made me relaxed and even enthusiastic about talking, which I rarely am. As a matter of fact this enthusiasm for talking technically makes me seem to myself, as I read over the transcript, a kind of apprentice plumber of fiction, a Cluny Brown at the writer's trade, but there we were.

J.D.

INTERVIEWER

You have said that writing is a hostile act; I have always wanted to ask you why.

DIDION

It's hostile in that you're trying to make somebody see something the way you see it, trying to impose your idea, your picture. It's hostile to try to wrench around someone else's mind that way. Quite often you want to tell somebody your dream, your nightmare. Well, nobody wants to hear about someone else's dream, good or bad; nobody wants to walk around with it. The writer is always tricking the reader into listening to the dream.

INTERVIEWER

Are you conscious of the reader as you write? Do you write listening to the reader listening to you?

DIDION

Obviously I listen to a reader, but the only reader I hear is me. I am always writing to myself. So very possibly I'm com-

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mitting an aggressive and hostile act toward myself.

INTERVIEWER

So when you ask, as you do in many nonfiction pieces, "Do you get the point?", you are really asking if you *yourself* get the point.

DIDION

Yes. Once in a while, when I first started to write pieces, I would try to write to a reader other than myself. I always failed. I would freeze up.

INTERVIEWER

When did you know you wanted to write?

DIDION

I wrote stories from the time I was a little girl, but I didn't want to be a writer. I wanted to be an actress. I didn't realize then that it's the same impulse. It's make-believe. It's performance. The only difference being that a writer can do it all alone. I was struck a few years ago when a friend of ours—an actress—was having dinner here with us and a couple of other writers. It suddenly occurred to me that she was the only person in the room who couldn't plan what she was going to do. She had to wait for someone to ask her, which is a strange way to live.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever have a writing teacher?

DIDION

Mark Schorer was teaching at Berkeley when I was an undergraduate there, and he helped me. I don't mean he helped me with sentences, or paragraphs—nobody has time for that with student papers; I mean that he gave me a sense of what writing was about, what it was for.

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INTERVIEWER

Did any writer influence you more than others?

DIDION

I always say Hemingway, because he taught me how sentences worked. When I was fifteen or sixteen I would type out his stories to learn how the sentences worked. I taught myself to type at the same time. A few years ago when I was teaching a course at Berkeley I reread *A Farewell to Arms* and fell right back into those sentences. I mean they're perfect sentences. Very direct sentences, smooth rivers, clear water over granite, no sinkholes.

INTERVIEWER

You've called Henry James an influence.

DIDION

He wrote perfect sentences too, but very indirect, very complicated. Sentences *with* sinkholes. You could drown in them. I wouldn't dare to write one. I'm not even sure I'd dare to read James again. I loved those novels so much that I was paralyzed by them for a long time. All those possibilities. All that perfectly reconciled style. It made me afraid to put words down.

INTERVIEWER

I wonder if some of your nonfiction pieces aren't shaped as a single Jamesian sentence.

DIDION

That would be the ideal, wouldn't it. An entire piece—eight, ten, twenty pages—strung on a single sentence. Actually the sentences in my nonfiction are far more complicated than the sentences in my fiction. More clauses. More semi-colons. I don't seem to hear that many clauses when I'm writing a novel.

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INTERVIEWER

You have said that once you have your first sentence you've got your piece. That's what Hemingway said. All he needed was his first sentence and he had his short story.

DIDION

What's so hard about that first sentence is that you're stuck with it. Everything else is going to flow out of that sentence. And by the time you've laid down the first *two* sentences, your options are all gone.

INTERVIEWER

The first is the gesture, the second is the commitment.

DIDION

Yes, and the last sentence in a piece is another adventure. It should open the piece up. It should make you go back and start reading from page one. That's how it *should* be, but it doesn't always work. I think of writing anything at all as a kind of highwire act. The minute you start putting words on paper you're eliminating possibilities. Unless you're Henry James.

INTERVIEWER

I wonder if your ethic—what you call your "harsh Protestant ethic"—doesn't close things up for you, doesn't hinder your struggle to keep all the possibilities open.

DIDION

I suppose that's part of the dynamic. I start a book and I want to make it perfect, want it to turn every color, want it to *be the world.* Ten pages in, I've already blown it, limited it, made it less, marred it. That's very discouraging. I hate the book at that point. After a while I arrive at an accommodation: well, it's not the ideal, it's not the perfect object I wanted to make, but maybe—if I go ahead and finish it anyway—I can get it right next time. Maybe I can have another chance.

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INTERVIEWER

Have any women writers been strong influences?

DIDION

I think only in the sense of being models for a life, not for a style. I think that the Brontës probably encouraged my own delusions of theatricality. Something about George Eliot attracted me a great deal. I think I was not temperamentally attuned to either Jane Austen or Virginia Woolf.

INTERVIEWER

What are the disadvantages, if any, of being a woman writer?

DIDION

When I was starting to write—in the late '50's, early '60's—there was a kind of social tradition in which male novelists could operate. Hard drinkers, bad livers. Wives, wars, big fish, Africa, Paris, no second acts. A man who wrote novels had a role in the world, and he could play that role and do whatever he wanted behind it. A woman who wrote novels had no particular role. Women who wrote novels were quite often perceived as invalids. Carson McCullers, Jane Bowles. Flannery O'Connor of course. Novels by women tended to be described, even by their publishers, as sensitive. I'm not sure this is so true any more, but it certainly was at the time, and I didn't much like it. I dealt with it the same way I deal with everything. I just tended my own garden, didn't pay much attention, behaved—I suppose—deviously. I mean I didn't actually let too many people know what I was doing.

INTERVIEWER

Advantages?

DIDION

The advantages would probably be precisely the same as the disadvantages. A certain amount of resistance is good for

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anybody. It keeps you awake.

INTERVIEWER

Can you tell simply from the style of writing, or the sensibility, if the author is a woman?

DIDION

Well, if style is character—and I believe it is—then obviously your sexual identity is going to show up in your style. I don't want to differentiate between style and sensibility, by the way. Again, your style *is* your sensibility. But this whole question of sexual identity is very tricky. If I were to read, cold, something by Anais Nin, I would probably say that it was written by a man trying to write as a woman. I feel the same way about Colette, and yet both those women are generally regarded as intensely "feminine" writers. I don't seem to recognize "feminine." On the other hand, *Victory* seems to me a profoundly female novel. So does *Nostromo,* so does *The Secret Agent.*

INTERVIEWER

Do you find it easy to write in depth about the opposite sex?

DIDION

Run River was partly from a man's point of view. Everett McClellan. I don't remember those parts as being any harder than the other parts. A lot of people thought Everett was "shadowy," though. He's the most distinct person in the book to me. I loved him. I loved Lily and Martha but I loved Everett more.

INTERVIEWER

Was *Run River* your first novel? It seems so finished for a first that I thought you might have shelved earlier ones.

DIDION

I've put away nonfiction things, but I've never put away a

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novel. I might throw out forty pages and write forty new ones, but it's all part of the same novel. I wrote the first half of *Run River* at night over a period of years. I was working at *Vogue* during the day, and at night I would work on these scenes for a novel. In no particular sequence. When I finished a scene I would tape the pages together and pin the long strips of pages on the wall of my apartment. Maybe I wouldn't touch it for a month or two, then I'd pick a scene off the wall and rewrite it. When I had about 150 pages done I showed them to twelve publishers, all of whom passed. The thirteenth, Ivan Obolensky, gave me an advance, and with that $1000 or whatever it was I took a two-month leave of absence and wrote the last half of the book. That's why the last half is better than the first half. I kept trying to run the first half through again, but it was intractable. It was set. I'd worked on it for too many years in too many moods. Not that the last half is perfect. It's smoother, it moves faster, but there are a great many unresolved problems. I didn't know how to do anything at all. I had wanted *Run River* to be very complicated chronologically, to somehow have the past and present operating simultaneously, but I wasn't accomplished enough to do that with any clarity. Everybody who read it said it wasn't working. So I straightened it out. Present time to flashback to present time. Very straight. I had no option, because I didn't know how to do it the other way. I just wasn't good enough.

INTERVIEWER

Did you or Jonathan Cape put the comma in the title of the English edition?

DIDION

It comes back to me that Cape put the comma in and Obolensky left the comma out, but it wasn't of very much interest to me because I hated it both ways. The working title was *In the Night Season,* which Obolensky didn't like. Actually the working title during the first half was *Harvest-Home,* which everybody dismissed out of hand as uncommercial,

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although later there was a big commercial book by Thomas Tryon called exactly that. Again, I was not very sure of myself then, or I never would have changed the title.

INTERVIEWER

Was the book autobiographical? I ask this for the obvious reason that first novels often are.

DIDION

It wasn't except that it took place in Sacramento. A lot of people there seemed to think that I had somehow maligned them and their families, but it was just a made-up story. The central incident came from a little one-inch story in the *New York Times* about a trial in the Carolinas. Someone was on trial for killing the foreman on his farm, that's all there was. I think I really put the novel in Sacramento because I was homesick. I wanted to remember the weather and the rivers.

INTERVIEWER

The heat on the rivers?

DIDION

The heat. I think that's the way the whole thing began. There's a lot of landscape which I never would have described if I hadn't been homesick. If I hadn't wanted to remember. The impulse was nostalgia. It's not an uncommon impulse among writers. I noticed it when I was reading *From Here to Eternity* in Honolulu just after James Jones died. I could see exactly that kind of nostalgia, that yearning for a place, overriding all narrative considerations. The incredible amount of description. When Prewitt tries to get from the part of town where he's been wounded out to Alma's house, every street is named. Every street is described. You could take that passage and draw a map of Honolulu. None of those descriptions have any narrative meaning. They're just remembering. Obsessive remembering. I could see the impulse.

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INTERVIEWER

But doesn't the impulse of nostalgia produce the eloquence in *Run River*?

DIDION

It's got a lot of sloppy stuff. Extraneous stuff. Words that don't work. Awkwardnesses. Scenes that should have been brought up, scenes that should have been played down. But then *Play It As It Lays* has a lot of sloppy stuff. I haven't reread *Common Prayer* but I'm sure that does too.

INTERVIEWER

How did you come to terms with point-of-view in *Play It As It Lays*? Did you ever question your authority to do it in both first and third person?

DIDION

I wanted to make it all first person but I wasn't good enough to maintain a first. There were tricks I didn't know. So I began playing with a close third person, just to get something down. By a "close third" I mean not an omniscient third but a third very close to the mind of the character. Suddenly one night I realized that I had some first person and some third person and that I was going to have to go with both, or just not write a book at all. I was scared. Actually I don't mind the way it worked out. The juxtaposition of first and third turned out to be very useful toward the ending, when I wanted to accelerate the whole thing. I don't think I'd do it again, but it was a solution to that particular set of problems. There's a point when you go with what you've got. Or you don't go.

INTERVIEWER

How long, in all, did *Play It As It Lays* take to write?

DIDION

I made notes and wrote pages over several years but the actual physical writing—sitting down at the typewriter and

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working every day until it was finished—took me from January until November 1969. Then of course I had to run it through again—I never know quite what I'm doing when I'm writing a novel, and the actual line of it doesn't emerge until I'm finishing. Before I ran it through again I showed it to John and then I sent it to Henry Robbins, who was my editor then at Farrar, Straus. It was quite rough with places marked "CHAPTER TO COME." Henry was unalarmed by my working that way, and he and John and I sat down one night in New York and talked, for about an hour before dinner, about what it needed doing. We all knew what it needed. We all agreed. After that I took a couple of weeks and ran it through. It was just typing and pulling the line through.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean exactly by "pulling through?"

DIDION

For example. I didn't know that BZ was an important character in *Play It As It Lays* until the last few weeks I was working on it. So those places I marked "CHAPTER TO COME" were largely places where I was going to go back and pull BZ through, hit him harder, prepare for the way it finally went.

INTERVIEWER

How did you feel about BZ's suicide at the end?

DIDION

I didn't realize until after I'd written it that it was essentially the same ending as *Run River.* The women let the men commit suicide.

INTERVIEWER

I read that *Play It As It Lays* crystallized for you when you were sitting in the lobby of the Riviera Hotel in Las Vegas and saw a girl walk through.

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DIDION

I had thought Maria lived in New York. Maybe she was a model. Anyway she was getting a divorce, going through grief. When I saw this actress in the Riviera Hotel it occurred to me that Maria could be an actress. In California.

INTERVIEWER

Was she always Maria Wyeth?

DIDION

She didn't even have a name. Sometimes I'll be fifty, sixty pages into something and I'll still be calling a character "X." I don't have a very clear idea of who the characters are until they start talking. Then I start to love them. By the time I finish the book I love them so much that I want to stay with them. I don't want to leave them ever.

INTERVIEWER

Do your characters talk to you?

DIDION

After a while. In a way. When I started *Common Prayer* all I knew about Charlotte was that she was a nervous talker and told pointless stories. A distracted kind of voice. Then one day I was writing the Christmas party at the American Embassy, and I had Charlotte telling these bizarre anecdotes with no point while Victor Strasser-Mendana keeps trying to find out who she is, what she's doing in Boca Grande, who her husband is, what her husband does. And suddenly Charlotte says: "He runs guns. I wish they had caviar." Well, when I heard Charlotte say this, I had a very clear fix on who she was. I went back and rewrote some early stuff.

INTERVIEWER

Did you reshuffle a lot and, if so, how? Did you use pins or tape or what?

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DIDION

Toward the beginning of a novel I'll write a lot of sections that lead me nowhere. So I'll abandon them, pin them on a board with the idea of picking them up later. Quite early in *Common Prayer* I wrote a part about Charlotte Douglas going to airports, a couple of pages that I liked but couldn't seem to find a place for. I kept picking this part up and putting it in different places, but it kept stopping the narrative; it was wrong everywhere but I was determined to use it. Finally I think I put it in the middle of the book. Sometimes you can get away with things in the middle of a book. The first hundred pages are very tricky, the first forty pages especially. You have to make sure you have the characters you want. That's really the most complicated part.

INTERVIEWER

Strategy would seem to be far more complicated in *Common Prayer* than in *Play It As It Lays* because it had so much more plot.

DIDION

Common Prayer had a lot of plot and an awful lot of places and weather. I wanted a dense texture and so I kept throwing stuff into it, making promises. For example I promised a revolution. Finally, when I got within twenty pages of the end, I realized I still hadn't delivered this revolution. I had a lot of threads, and I'd overlooked this one. So then I had to go back and lay in the preparation for the revolution. Putting in that revolution was like setting in a sleeve. Do you know what I mean? Do you sew? I mean I had to work that revolution in on the bias, had to ease out the wrinkles with my fingers.

INTERVIEWER

So the process of writing the novel is for you the process of discovering the precise novel that you want to write.

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DIDION

Exactly. At the beginning I don't have anything at all, don't have any people, any weather, any story. All I have is a technical sense of what I want to do. For example I want sometime to write a very long novel, 800 pages. I want to write an 800-page novel precisely *because* I think a novel should be read at one sitting. If you read a novel over a period of days or weeks the threads get lost, the suspension breaks. So the problem is to write an 800 page novel in which all the filaments are so strong that nothing breaks or gets forgotten ever. I wonder if Garcia Marquez didn't do that in *The Autumn of the Patriarch.* I don't want to read it because I'm afraid he might have done it, but I did look at it, and it seems to be written in a single paragraph. *One paragraph.* The whole novel. I love that idea.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any writing rituals?

DIDION

The most important is that I need an hour alone before dinner, with a drink, to go over what I've done that day. I can't do it late in the afternoon because I'm too close to it. Also the drink helps. It removes me from the pages. So I spend this hour taking things out and putting other things in. Then I start the next day by redoing all of what I did the day before, following these evening notes. When I'm really working I don't like to go out or have anybody to dinner, because then I lose the hour. If I don't have the hour, and start the next day with just some bad pages and nowhere to go, I'm in low spirits. Another thing I need to do, when I'm near the end of the book, is sleep in the same room with it. That's one reason I go home to Sacramento to finish things. Somehow the book doesn't leave you when you're asleep right next to it. In Sacramento nobody cares if I appear or not. I can just get up and start typing.

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INTERVIEWER

What's the main difference between the process of fiction and the process of nonfiction?

DIDION

The element of discovery takes place, in nonfiction, not during the writing but during the research. This makes writing a piece very tedious. You already know what it's about.

INTERVIEWER

Are the subject of pieces determined by editors or are you free to go your own way?

DIDION

I make them up. They reflect what I want to do at the time, where I want to be. When I worked for *Life* I did a great many Honolulu pieces—probably more than *Life* might have wanted—because that's where I wanted to be then. Last night I finished a piece for *Esquire* about the California Water Project. I had always wanted to see the room where they control the water, where they turn it on and off all over the state, and I also wanted to see my mother and father. The water and my mother and father were all in Sacramento, so I went to Sacramento. I like to do pieces because it forces me to make appointments and see people, but I never wanted to be a journalist or reporter. If I were doing a story and it turned into a big breaking story, all kinds of teams flying in from papers and magazines and the networks, I'd probably think of something else to do.

INTERVIEWER

You've said that when you were an editor at *Vogue,* Allene Talmey showed you how verbs worked.

DIDION

Every day I would go into her office with eight lines of copy or a caption or something. She would sit there and mark it up

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with a pencil and get very angry about extra words, about verbs not working. Nobody has time to do that except on a magazine like *Vogue*. Nobody, no teacher. I've taught and I've tried to do it, but I didn't have that much time and neither did the students. In an eight-line caption everything had to work, every word, every comma. It would end up being a *Vogue* caption, but on its own terms it had to work perfectly.

INTERVIEWER

You say you treasure privacy, that "being left alone and leaving others alone is regarded by members of my family as the highest form of human endeavor." How does this mesh with writing personal essays, particularly the first column you did for *Life* where you felt it imperative to inform the reader that you were at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in lieu of getting a divorce?

DIDION

I don't know. I could say that I was writing to myself, and of course I was, but it's a little more complicated than that. I mean the fact that eleven million people were going to see that page didn't exactly escape my attention. There's a lot of mystery to me about writing and performing and showing off in general. I know a singer who throws up every time she has to go onstage. But she still goes on.

INTERVIEWER

How did the "fragility-of-Joan Didion" myth start?

DIDION

Because I'm small, I suppose, and because I don't talk a great deal to people I don't know. Most of my sentences drift off, don't end. It's a habit I've fallen into. I don't deal well with people. I would think that this appearance of not being very much in touch was probably one of the reasons I started writing.

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INTERVIEWER

Do you think some reviewers and readers have mistaken you for your characters?

DIDION

There was a certain tendency to read *Play It As It Lays* as an autobiographical novel, I suppose because I lived out here and looked skinny in photographs and nobody knew anything else about me. Actually the only thing Maria and I have in common is an occasional inflection, which I picked up from her—not vice versa—when I was writing the book. I like Maria a lot. Maria was very strong, very tough.

INTERVIEWER

That's where I have difficulty with what so many critics have said about your women. Your women hardly seem fragile to me.

DIDION

Did you read Diane Johnson's review of *Common Prayer* in *The New York Review of Books*? She suggested that the women were strong to the point of being figures in a romance, that they were romantic heroines rather than actual women in actual situations. I think that's probably true. I think I write romances.

INTERVIEWER

I'd like to ask you about things that recur in your work. There's the line about "dirty tulips" on Park Avenue in a short story and in a piece. Or how about the large square emerald ring that Lily wears in *Run River* and Charlotte wears in *Common Prayer*?

DIDION

Does Lily wear one too? Maybe she does. I've always wanted one, but I'd never buy one. For one thing emeralds—when you look at them closely—are always disappointing. The green

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is never blue enough. Ideally—if the green were blue enough —you could look into an emerald for the rest of your life. Sometimes I think about Katherine Anne Porter's emeralds, sometimes I wonder if they're blue enough. I hadn't planned that emerald in *Common Prayer* to recur the way it does. It was just something I thought Charlotte might have, but as I went along the emerald got very useful. I kept taking that emerald one step further. By the end of the novel the emerald is almost the narrative. I had a good time with that emerald.

INTERVIEWER

What about the death of a parent, which seems to recur as a motif?

DIDION

You know how doctors who work with children get the children to tell stories? And they figure out from the stories what's frightening the child, what's worrying the child, what the child thinks? Well, a novel is just a story. You work things out in the stories you tell.

INTERVIEWER

And the abortion or loss of a child?

DIDION

The death of children worries me all the time. It's on my mind. Even *I* know that, and I usually don't know what's on my mind. On the whole I don't want to think too much about why I write what I write. If I know what I'm doing I don't do it, I can't do it. The abortion in *Play It As It Lays* didn't occur to me until I'd written quite a bit of the book. The book needed an active moment, a moment at which things changed for Maria, a moment in which—this was very, very important —Maria was center stage for a number of pages. Not at a party reacting to somebody else. Not just thinking about her lot in life, either. A long section in which she was the main player. The abortion was a narrative strategy.

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INTERVIEWER

Was it a narrative strategy in *Run River*?

DIDION

Actually it was the excuse for a digression, into landscape. Lily has an abortion in San Francisco and then she comes home on the Greyhound bus. I always think of the Greyhound bus and not the abortion. The bus part is very detailed about the look of the towns. It's something I wrote in New York, you can tell, I was homesick.

INTERVIEWER

How about the freeways that reappear?

DIDION

Actually I don't drive on the freeway. I'm afraid to. I freeze at the top of the entrance, at the instant when you have to let go and join it. Occasionally I *do* get on the freeway—usually because I'm shamed into it—and it's such an extraordinary experience that it sticks in my mind. So I use it.

INTERVIEWER

And the white space at the corner of Sunset and La Brea in Hollywood? You mention it in some piece and then in *Play It As It Lays*.

DIDION

I've never analysed it, but one line of poetry I always have in mind is the line from *Four Quartets*: "at the still point of the turning world." I tend to move toward still points. I think of the equator as a still point. I suppose that's why I put Boca Grande on the equator.

INTERVIEWER

A narrative strategy.

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DIDION

Well, this whole question of how you work out the narrative is very mysterious. It's a good deal more arbitrary than most people who don't do it would ever believe. When I started *Play It As It Lays* I gave Maria a child, a daughter, Kate, who was in kindergarten. I remember writing a passage in which Kate came home from school and showed Maria a lot of drawings, orange and blue crayon drawings, and when Maria asked her what they were, Kate said, "pools on fire." You can see I wasn't having too much success writing this child. So I put her in a hospital. You never meet her. Now it turned out to have a great deal of importance—Kate's being in the hospital is a very large element in *Play It As It Lays*—but it began because I couldn't write a child, no other reason. Again, in *Common Prayer,* Marin bombs the Transamerica Building because I *needed* her to. I needed a crisis in Charlotte's life. Well, at this very moment, right now, I can't think of the Transamerica Building without thinking of Marin and her pipe bomb and her gold bracelet, but it was all very arbitrary in the beginning.

INTERVIEWER

What misapprehensions, illusions and so forth have you had to struggle against in your life? In a commencement address you once said there were many.

DIDION

All kinds. I was one of those children who tended to perceive the world in terms of things read about it. I began with a literary idea of experience, and I still don't know where all the lies are. For example, it may not be true that people who try to fly always burst into flames and fall. That may not be true at all. In fact people *do fly,* and land safely. But I don't really believe that. I still see Icarus. I don't seem to have a set of physical facts at my disposal, don't seem to understand how things really work. I just have an *idea* of how they work, which is always trouble. As Henry James told us.

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INTERVIEWER

You seem to live your life on the edge, or, at least, on the literary idea of the edge.

DIDION

Again, it's a literary idea, and it derives from what engaged me imaginatively as a child. I can recall disapproving of the golden mean, always thinking there was more to be learned from the dark journey. The dark journey engaged me more. I once had in mind a very light novel, all surface, all conversations and memories and recollections of some people in Honolulu who were getting along fine, one or two misapprehensions about the past notwithstanding. Well, I'm working on that book now, but it's not running that way at all. Not at all.

INTERVIEWER

It always turns into danger and apocalypse.

DIDION

Well, I grew up in a dangerous landscape. I think people are more affected than they know by landscapes and weather. Sacramento was a very extreme place. It was very flat, flatter than most people can imagine, and I still favor flat horizons. The weather in Sacramento was as extreme as the landscape. There were two rivers, and these rivers would flood in the winter and run dry in the summer. Winter was cold rain and tule fog. Summer was 100°, 105°, 110°. Those extremes affect the way you deal with the world. It so happens that if you're a writer the extremes show up. They don't if you sell insurance.

—Linda Kuehl

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Portfolio

Photographing.

Nicholas Africano

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I just got back from Egypt.

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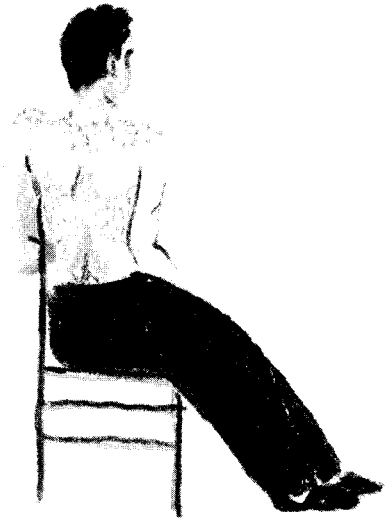

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Very nice. Wonderful.

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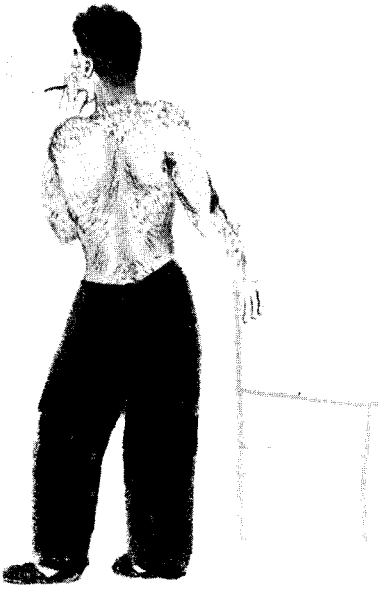

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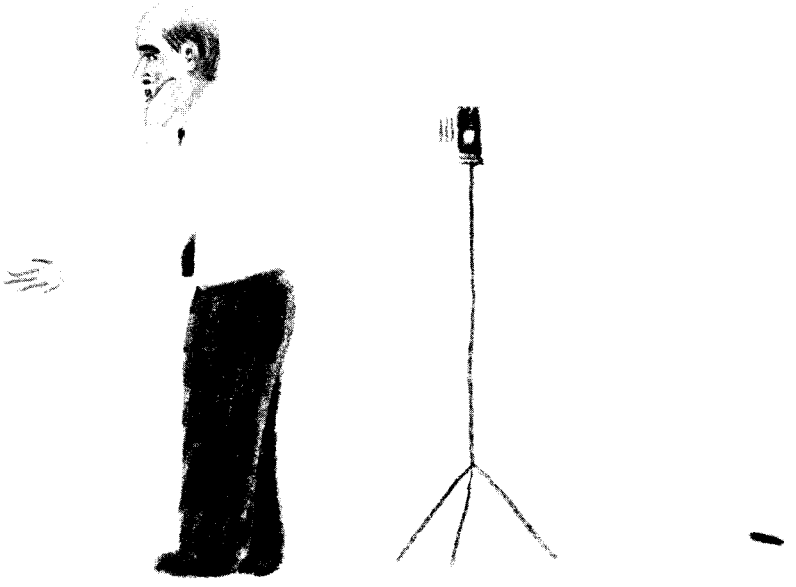
There. Good. Good.



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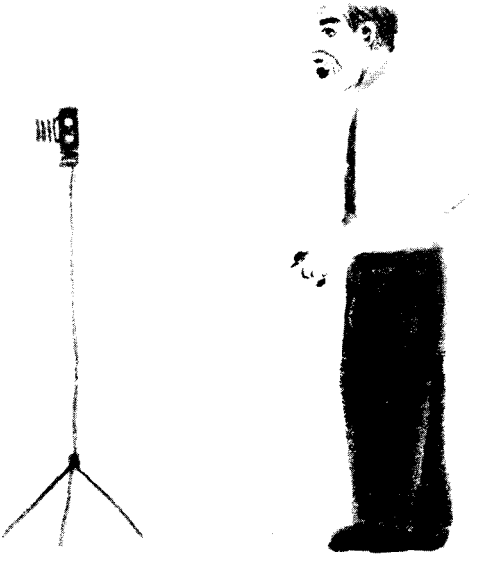
I like Balthus.



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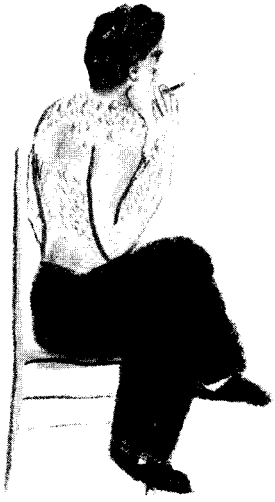

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Make more smoke.

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My Vegetable Love

Barbara Grossman

My brother is a horticulturist. From where nobody knows. We are a family of merchants, shopkeepers, purveyors of service; none of us is concerned with growth. But my brother keeps two hundred healthy plants on our porch, and they respond to his tending as if he'd come from farmers. On that porch, in heavy clay pots stacked so close as to become walls, hanging in curtains from glinting hooks screwed into the ceiling, on shelves and windowsills and perched upon the edges of upturned orange crates, grow plants with names enough to provide an entire generation identity.

I too have had some small success with growing things. A sensible variety of cacti grow along my south window; not lovely, but strong, stubborn plants, requiring little care, going dormant during cold months. I cannot share my brother's enthusiasm for quantity. Certainly plants are decorative and it is pleasing to see them grow, to observe a change in shape or be surprised by a bloom. I therefore keep a few beneath my window to enjoy. My brother's skill with his

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collection, his ability to nurture magnificent specimens of so many varieties, is too much related to his desire to possess so many. There has not been a week in the past four years when he's not come breathing up our front steps with a tenderly wrapped addition in his arms. I have dreams about their weight causing the floors to fall in.

Not long ago I discovered, buried under a boy's stamp, coin and stone collections, two grade school notebooks with marble designed covers. Amused, that after so many purges, these had survived on my brother's closet floor I opened one. There were no spelling lists or addition problems, rather a journal; his diary. The entries were not dated and his style was graphic, detailed, highly descriptive. Whole pages were devoted to the record of a single event. It was compulsive, it was overwritten. I found it sordid.

Excess was his trait from the beginning. So corpulent a newborn our pediatrician steadily reduced his ration of formula from what the others in his glassy nursery were allowed. He slept such terrifying, long hours, that Mother would awaken at those hours she was accustomed to feeding me and drop books on the linoleum to get him up, crying for food. She tells us that he was an inordinately good baby and this frightened her.

I was her careful child. Athletic, sturdy, having muscles adults pinched with surprised winks of pleasure, I never so much as cut myself enough to require suturing. To this day I've had no broken bones, no loosened tendons or slippery joints. Injury is something I never meet. My teeth resist decay and disalignment with a tenacity that makes dentists marvel. I don't remember being especially careful—but there it is.

My brother was known by his first name at County General. Embedded fish hooks were his trademark, but a split skull and femur, poisoning, unstoppable bleeding and a first degree burn were his as well. He swallowed two ounces of india ink, a bottle of flavored aspirin, random cleaning preparations and a bit of ammonia during his early years and was pumped clean of all these liquids by stern interns. Never

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do I recall seeing him make it to first base without twisting an ankle. When he climbed the stairlike pines in the arboretum he fell. Puddles he could not avoid, and though this trait is common to children he was the only one of us to fall unconscious into one from his bike, inhaling nearly a pint before a panicked friend yanked him out. Once frightened by the approach of a nasty janitor, while shoving his head between the bars of a steel banister, he pulled out too fast and put a gash into his forehead that ran four inches north from his left eye and vanished into his hairline. The jokes of the emergency room played upon his seemingly endless supply of blood and method. My parents worried that the numbers of insurance claims made would provoke suspicion. I think I must have feared him.

When I see him at work in the startling glare of the porch I am galled by the awful redness of his hands. I am still shocked by his body, the concavity of belly and buttock. There is no way to pinpoint the time he became angled like this—it is as if it occurred when I turned away. It is like another accident. Not that he is unattractive; he is manly and draws the eyes of women on the street. Perhaps I never expected him to succeed to maturity.

I observe him with his plants. He stands with tools slung around his hips, dripping filtered water from a can, poking holes near roots with a copper spade, snipping dry leaves and spindly stems off plants he names for me in a low drone, an incantation of his concern. The Latin is comfortable in his mouth. I am not used to seeing him this calm and at ease; it confuses me. The light there, the moist air, the unexpected touch of a branch against my cheek make me too alert. I leave to take a walk. On the front steps I find my palms are stained brown as if I'd touched his potting soil. I never do, though.

Most of his injuries are self-inflicted, yet I admit to responsibility for some of his trips to County General. All of us finally hurt him. In a neighborhood playground during a hot vacation afternoon, father moved to break my brother's swift decent on a sliding board and cracked the youngster's fore-

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arm just above the wrist. While retrieving him from off the refrigerator top, mother fell with him in her grip and smacked a knot into the ridge above his nose that subsided after a month to become a strawberry colored scar. Helping him to untangle his hand from the mouth of our in-sink disposal, an uncle dislocated my brother's shoulder. And my grandmother, in her attempt to push the boy away from the white-hot element of an electric range, knocked a pot of butterscotch pudding acorss the cuffs of his pajama bottoms and onto his naked feet.

From me he suffered the normal quantities of bumps and bruises. We fought with pleasure, tumbling back-to-belly across the lawn, screaming into the grass. Indians, Marines, wrestlers; these are rough games. We made violent mistakes.

One spring a thunderstorm tore the shingles off the roof and scattered them, along with the dead refuse of unpruned trees, woody rose branches and the heads of flowers, over the yard. My brother and I watched the excited weather from the dry cave of the awning father had erected over the patio. Water caught in pools above. We prodded the ballooning canvas with broomsticks and sent cascades of rain off the braided cotton fringe at the awning's hem. When the rain broke we moved out onto the grass. The sky was green. Familiar trees had changed shape. A willow had fallen across the wheelbarrow. We grabbed hold of two rain-black branches and whirled them above our heads, yelling into the air, turning faster on our toes than we wanted. My branch caught my brother on his back. He took this as a challenge and when I saw that he did I made it one. Running after me he found his weapon too clumsy and exchanged it for a heavily tarred shingle. It glinted wet in his fist. I ran from him, he followed at terrific, sprinter's speed and threw the shingle in my direction. The trajectory of the falling shingle coincided not with my head, but his own, dropping edge earthward, velocity times mass. A rush of colored blood burst up from his skull what seemed feet into the air.

He was awake during the ride to County General. I

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remember he looked almost regal, infinitely dignified. I was infuriated by his clumsiness, hilarious with its result. There I learned irony.

I think that when I dream about dogs I am dreaming about my brother. Swaddled miniatures are carried through rooms by nurses with a sense of urgency. We owned a dog; a small collie all fur and dusty eyes. I trained her. Our parents enjoyed her warm friendliness, my brother loved her, but every night I filled her bowl with dry food and she became mine. When at last she was sent, crippled by arthritis, to be gassed, there was in the quality of our mourning both a sadness for her death and a pity at my loss. Perhaps her being dead gives me these sweaty dreams. I am not sensitive and am bewildered by so strong a reaction. When I look for reasons I find my brother, though my route there is skeletal and the destination unnerving.

None of us knows what to make of him. He will not choose a profession. Father offered to take him into the business. Mother produced a secret saving account that might purchase the stock and pay a year's rent for a small flower shop. I have nothing to offer but my schooling. My brother refuses all we suggest. He is not charmed by finance, commercial considerations would kill his joy in horticulture, the academy he finds deadening. He will not identify his calling. To us his life is too solitary—we worry about futures. He claims contentment and argues the present.

I don't know how to understand his silence because I leap to speech and detest shyness. His solitude has not always been so strong. When young he had friends, although he chose for his companions the unusual children in the neighborhood: a boy with sun-white hair and glasses thick as his fingers; a set of twins so freckled as to be disfigured in summer; that violent little girl across the street who I found once sitting on my brother's head and screaming like a loosened fanbelt. I ran to them and pulled so hard on that creature's hair that some tore loose. She ran home. My brother took the tangle from my hand and we went into the house. I had never done any-

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thing like that before. I still doubt the memory.

Father keeps portraits of us on his office walls. They are ordinary photographs. Mother is smiling over a holiday table. I am seen twisted three-quarters profile into the lens of a yearbook photographer's camera. Only my brother appears in action. He is walking toward the frame from a pier that extends into a flat ocean. His jeans push up his knees in folds that are alive and his T-shirt stretches across a chest that's a year's growth too large for it. From one arm falls a string of blank-eyed fish. His elbow bends with their weight to rest on his waist and push out his hip in a gesture that is slatternly. He views his catch; a smile drags toward his ear. It is not an extraordinary picture—it is an extraordinary smile. Not another photograph exists in which he smiles, for he rarely responds with humor, just a benign seriousness that makes us wonder at the texture of his thoughts.

The diaries I've found confirm his humorlessness. All that he writes there is done so without regard for the jokes in his life. When I discovered these notes I thought them to be intentionally written for me, toward some shared and secret understanding. But he is too ruthless in his disclosures, too graphic and droll to mean the contents to be anything more than a private record. I was embarrassed at his candor. I do not regret finding those notebooks, I wish only that he had not written them. They invade my privacy.

Lately he eats poorly. Mother tempts him with former favorites but he abstains. He leaves the table as if relieved of the chore of chewing and goes directly to his porch. I follow him and find my brother gulping air over his pots, nauseated.

Once, everything within his reach passed eventually into his mouth. He was sent from classrooms to stand fugitive in the corridor for his too generous consumption of mucilage and rubber eraser. He'd devour jars of white paste in an afternoon. A pencil lasted a week before it was taken from him looking as if some rodent had made a meal of it. Father's tiny saccarin pills disappeared with a rapidity that aroused suspicion. I came upon him one evening after supper as he

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hunched elbows to knees in the yard, licking the silver specs of mica out of a handful of earth.

This diet disturbed his digestion. His times on the toilet were infrequent and troubled, bad times when all of us suffered the closed grunts echoing off the tiled walls. Nightly he ingested patent medicines, bland and sticky concoctions impossible to swallow—nothing relieved him. Sometimes three weeks would pass without action. Questions were whispered after meals, after hot baths. The answer continued in the negative. A doctor's advice would be sought and mechanical means counseled against. Finally my brother would be deposited upon the toilet with instructions not to leave his post until the desired effect was produced. His feces were black and hard as hamster pellets, musical in their fall. Always he flushed too late and father was dispatched with plunger and snake to clear the pipes for our more daily use. My brother called me to witness a miracle in that bathroom. Sparkling under water was a half-exposed copper indian head. An unremembered snack.

His odd habits brought down a regular assignment of punishments. Neither father nor mother could strike us and so were forced to imagine and enact deprivations appropriate to the misdemeanor. This was most difficult. For strange swallowings my brother was made to spend meal hours in the guest room, a lap-tray on his knees. This bedroom was as dull as a bed and an empty closet. We'd hear him humming in there, humming without tune two long notes that varied not in pitch but only duration. This worked so as to antagonize my ulcerous father, who, to protect his delicate stomach, would end my brother's captivity early. Nothing discouraged him. His allowance was so often cut off it was no allowance. Gifts were retrieved like fish lures. He ate.

And he retaliated. He poured varnish over mother's dress watch. He placed a can of aerosol air freshener on the shelf where mother habitually kept her hairspray. Mother spent an evening at the theatre stinking of pine forests. He rigged rugs to vases; I opened doors, porceline shattered. Our tooth-

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brushes were regularly rubbed in antiseptic soap. Mornings we gagged and foamed. His most ingenious trick was to shave redwood into father's pipe tobacco. None of these acts endeared him to us.

He came home recently with a succulent. He gave it to me, he held the fleshy plant out at the ends of his arms and made his presentation muttering a phrase I recognized from his diaries. It was a mistake. To express my thanks I rose early the next morning and washed his plants with the spray gun he normally employs for that purpose. My brother arrived on the porch when I was high on a stool reaching up to a fern. Water dripped into my armpits. I lowered the spray gun and repeated to him the phrase he'd used unconsciously. He screwed the faucet shut, helped me off the stool. I repeated the phrase. He opened the front door and faced the neighborhood. Again I began to speak but he turned to me mid-sentence, his expression so disinterested that I swallowed my spit and left the porch.

I have remembered a game we played. Bedtimes were not welcome during the long summer evenings. We were sent up bathe and dress for bed while it was still light and the sounds of older children rose to the open windows. Unable to sleep we developed a system of communication composed of knocks. We shared a wall—his bed and mine lined either side of a thin plaster partition. One knock meant come in. Two knocks meant stay out. Three knocks indicated danger, parent in the corridor.

I was the initiator—knock. Came my brother's reply—knock knock knock. We waited. Knock. He'd creep into my room and stand at the foot of my bed awaiting my signal to join me there. I took the space close to the wall. As a precautionary measure we locked legs at our knees. Now no parent could part us in our sleep without a fuss. Close as shoes tucked one in one we exchanged back-tickling while chanting a song:

We're going on a treasure hunt,
X marks the spot,

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Three big circles and one big dot.
Go up, go down,
Follow the dotted line,
Take three big steps and stop.

Each line had an accompaning gesture, a design we traced across each other's spine. The light going blue in the windows we would stroke ourselves to sleep. We never awoke together for sometime in the night mother would find us linked there and remove my brother to his own bed on the other side of the partition.

I should mention that he was a bed-wetter. I should say that every night before our parents turned out their lights a cry would go down the corridor that connected our bedrooms: *Have you urinated? Then father'd trundle brother to the* bathroom. This process did not insure a dry night, somehow my brother found reserves with which to soak his sheets. We covered his mattress with rubber. It rotted away in a month. His tinkling looked like an ancient map of Europe. Devices were purchased. A moisture responsive alarm ran copper wires through a plastic sheet that lay beneath his cotton contour. When the suggestion of liquid contacted metal an alarm startled the entire family from its sleep. My brother waited till the buzzer ran itself down and then relieved himself without discovery until morning. We instituted a system of all-night walks to the toilet. He learned to intuit our approach and timed himself thirty minutes before and after so that the parent scheduled would find him damp and sweetly odiferous and give it up. I think he enjoyed the warmth of his urine.

Three times I've left his notebooks in some place other than where I found them. I have ruffled pages, laid down black thumb prints. I tear corners and remove entire pages. Nothing makes him respond. Rehearsed endlessly in my mind is a small speech intended to make clear to him my knowledge of these diaries. I cannot deliver it. I think of writing notes, slipping them between the leaves, notes to assert my participation. He will not answer. I am quickly

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running out of method. I fear that my intrusion will make him abandon writing. I also fear that he may continue too long. I do not know everything; this is some comfort.

Yesterday white fly invaded his porch. Enraged he announced the predator's presence during breakfast. His appetite was astounding. I offered assistance, we cleared the table and entered the humid room. In the dark my brother mixed chemicals as I examined leaves for damage and picked at the white bits of fur this insect wraps about itself. Working with a flashlight we laboriously sponged each green surface with the solution he'd prepared. I understood that these ministrations contained an element of danger, that the slightest miscalculation in the proportion of acid to base might halt photosynthesis entirely. We washed our hands and left. All day he has been in his room reading from a large blue botany manual.

I cannot sleep. The house grows shadows around me as I settle and resettle into the snaking bedclothes. I want to knock on the partition. I have gone so far as to raise my fist to do so. It occurs to me that his plants are all that keep him with us here.

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Two Poems by Ai

Nothing But Color

For Yukio Mishima

I didn't write Etsuko,
I sliced her open.
She was carmine inside
like a sea bass
and empty.
No viscera, nothing but color.
I love you like that, boy.
I pull the kimono down around your shoulders
and kiss you.
Then you let it fall open.
Each time, I cut you a little
and when you leave, I take the piece,
broil it, dip it in ginger sauce
and eat it. It burns my mouth so.
You laugh, holding me belly-down
with your body.
So much hurting to get to this moment,
when I'm beneath you,
wanting it to go on and to end.

At midnight, you say *see you tonight*
and I answer *there won't be any tonight,*
but you just smile, swing your sweater
over your head and tie the sleeves around your neck.
I hear you whistling long after you disappear
down the subway steps,
as I walk back home, my whole body tingling.
I undress
and put the bronze sword on my desk
beside the crumpled sheet of rice paper.

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I smooth it open
and read its single sentence:
I meant to do it.
No. It should be common and feminine
like *I can't go on sharing him,*
or something to imply that.
Or the truth:
that I saw in myself
the five signs of the decay of the angel
and you holding on, watching and free,
that I decided to go out
with the pungent odor
of this cold and consuming passion in my nose: death.
Now, I've said it. That vulgar word
that drags us down to the worms, sightless, predestined.
Goddamn you, boy.
Nothing I said mattered to you;
that bullshit about Etsuko or about killing myself.
I tear the note, then burn it.
The alarm clock goes off. 5:45 AM.
I take the sword and walk into the garden.
I look up. The sun, the moon,
two round teeth rock together
and the light of one chews up the other.
I stab myself in the belly,
wait, then stab myself again. Again.
It's snowing. I'll turn to ice,
but I'll burn anyone who touches me.
I start pulling my guts out,
those red silk cords
spiraling skyward,
and I'm climbing them
past the moon and the sun,
past darkness
into white.
I mean to live.

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Killing Floor

1 Russia, 1927

On the day the sienna-skinned man
held my shoulders between his spade-shaped hands,
easing me down into the azure water of Jordan,
I woke ninety-three million miles from myself,
Lev Davidovich Bronstein,
shoulder-deep in the Volga,
while the cheap dye of my black silk shirt darkened the water.

My head wet, water caught in my lashes.
Am I blind?
I rub my eyes, then wade back to shore,
undress and lie down,
until Stalin comes from his place beneath the birch tree.
He folds my clothes
and I button myself in my marmot coat,
and together we start the long walk back to Moscow.
He doesn't ask, *what did you see in the river?*,
but I hear the hosts of a man drowning in water and holiness,
the castrati voices I can't recognize,
skating on knives, from trees, from air
on the thin ice of my last night in Russia.
Leon Trotsky. Bread.
I want to scream, but silence holds my tongue
with small spade-shaped hands
and only this comes, so quietly
Stalin has to press his ear to my mouth:
I have only myself. Put me on the train.
I won't look back.

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2 Mexico, 1940

At noon today, I woke from a nightmare:
my friend Jacques ran toward me with an axe,
as I stepped from the train in Alma Ata.
He was dressed in yellow satin pants and shirt.
A marigold in winter.
When I held out my arms to embrace him,
he raised the axe and struck me at the neck,
my head fell to one side, hanging only by skin.
A river of sighs poured from the cut.

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Julia Mishkin

You Show Me Your Slides of India

There is the building.
Beside it stands a column

that will cure restlessness.
They say you must lick the column until

your tongue bleeds. And beside the molding
is a man, barefoot, grazing

the grass as a sheep would,
clothed in white where

he is clothed. And
beyond all of this, you are gazing

as if at a dusty globe,
into the black ocean.

It curls and spits.
The few buildings fold

themselves close to earth,
like thimbles. Even the whores

undress on the street, or
tell fortunes: "You

will never lose your curiosity
for the varieties of grief." How

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they bless strangers with their
cunning hands! It's not like

home, where water reflects whatever
watches it. So now you watch me

folding sheets, as if I conjured
sadness with my very touch. It's true:

the cracked cup of daylight spills its heart out
and I see dust where air was.

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Jason Bell

The Invisible Child

Bob's brother was born invisible, but through chance we can only call miraculous, he survived the delivery room and those dangerous early days on the planet. In fact, no one noticed him, although Bob's mother did feel a second squeeze and jolt ten minutes after Bob was out. The doctor, holding them both by one leg, weighed Bob in at sixteen pounds, two ounces. Remarkably heavy, he thought, for such an average looking child. The mother thought the tug at her second breast was a reaction sympathetic to the first, the way one hand wants to help the other.

Bob's birth wails were harmony.

Later, things became less amusing. Bob's invisible brother was a bed-wetter. And how could Bob account for all the food, the extra napkin? The allowance had to be split two ways.

Late at night, an invisible hand would steal up Bob's thigh to his privates and guide his own hand to a hard spot in the air. It was an invisible child's only chance for love.

And so it went till they were sixteen (only one cake), and Bob began to spend time with girls. He quickly got a reputation as a dangerous man in a dark car. He seemed to be everywhere at once.

Then, as always happens, they fell in love with the same girl. Oh, she was more than a girl, and she loved them both, not knowing there were two.

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At first it was enough to share her, but love always wants to hear its own name first and last, and a fine hatred finally bloomed between the brothers. Bob stopped eating his double's share at home, and began to lock the twin outside the car when they were out with the precious girl. He would lie on the hood in the moonlight watching their growing passion through the windshield. Soon, the presence grew desperate.

One night the pillow rose and wrapped around Bob's sleeping head. The twin hugged his brother until he felt alone for the first time.

Four blocks away the girl woke to an open window and the moon. The covers lifted and the pure warmth of first love moved against her, the invisible child holding her close as one does a new and single possession.

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Thomas Lux

View From a Porch

Thud, thud, all the sores go blind,
and over the basket of pears hover
brief addicted fruitflies.

The bruises on the pears are also blind.
The barn is blue—as far
from the Mediterranean as possible.

You'd think the residents, serious here—each one
scattered lonely as a cow-pie—you'd think:
blood-in-the-rafters. . . .But if you listen,

both ears, close, you'll hear a plow parting
earth; closer, some worms unburied
nervous. The chirpers are happy,

the humans go about jobs—in barn,
field, or house—healing,
unhealing, and sky again

is admitted to the dumb-lovely dirt
turned over and over, turning
its worn yawn wide: breathing, nearly alert.

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Two Poems by Christopher Bursk

Theives, Arabs of the Tall Grass

for Herb Fredericks

The winds smell of thieves' markets, of sweetbreads,
of rinds candied with thick syrups of the sun, of trees
glistening like dark men rubbed with oil.

In the dusk after school we are no one's sons, arabs of tall
grass
Caravans of trees cross our trails,
yellows, scarlets flapping like sleeves of many great robes.

Even the winds do not suspect the shadows we cast
in the back alleys of woods
where we murder each other effortlessly.

We lead small children into the dark
and leave them crying. The dark can be merciless,
we learn to be as unkind.

We follow winds like streets in a city before the birth of
Christ
come upon houses like travelers
to lights of inns, we have no need to go further.

Loved, we have no need for love;
thieves, surprised in other people's houses, we wait for night,
we touch our bodies like jewels made of paste.

In the tall grass each of us watches for his father
to stride home with trophies like Orion.
We tag after him like the dogstar at his heel.

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Gravity

Although I push little Nora off the roof,
edge over to see her clear,
bounce, and shatter like our best wedding china,
nothing ever breaks here,
I can't even sin,
Nora's back on the eaves, butt complacent as a nest:
gravity can't seem to win.

Although I tear up that false sentiment, a son,
conceit I can't sustain,—each simile,
fine phrase, each shred of every sound
is gathered in mid-air,
Christian's back, elastic and indisposable
as underwear:
nothing here hits the ground.

Although I let my parents be washed away
like a summer home,
insurance I try to collect, deadweight
I try to jettison,
abandoned on ice they learn to skate, in nursing homes
they bob upright and float:
no one anymore goes down with the boat.

Although I bury my wife, pipes swelling,
no one will buy this place;
just when at last I think I'm rid of her,
closing the sale,
all my old loves adjust
like ghosts
and rise tell-tale.

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Lawrence Kearney

The Cyclists

On the cover of the book of 19th-century
etchings, three lady bicyclists,
their black eyes fixed on the front wheels,
race toward an unseen goal.

Billowing behind them, hair & skirts & scarves
thrust them continually out of themselves—
till there is only wind & the spokes shivering
to a thin chrome light. And though

at any moment their mushrooming skirts
could catch in the treacherous rear wheels
& drag them down,
                the skirts
do not catch, & the cyclists race on,

locked in the story the wheels tell
each of them—a story of covering ground;
of a woman who went & never came back;
of nothing at all.

the spokes whirring till they vanish,
the feet & the pedals a single blur.

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Thomas Masiello

Music

for Joan Ravera

"...(dim shadow that she had always been)..."
—Nathaniel Hawthorne

The orchestrations of sunrise
much like the tune, abstract from the outset,
(this is the nature of music)
begin slowly,
for this is the tune remembered
which stays with you all day.

In the morning, you woke up
and it was there
already waiting,
irrevocably removed from the score and the piano,
playing itself to you.
That day you were distracted
and it took a long time for you to realize
that the calendar needed to be changed.
You were writing to me while "waiting for me
to come out of myself," as you said.
I still have the letter
and I remember that there is not one unusual
line in the whole text.
I had begun to recognize you,
but not as who I thought you were,
in that letter:
the face disappearing
coming back at an angle, the light and shade dividing
differently,
fugue-like,
someway I didn't really perceive you,
just parts of the face,
the nose, maybe, or the way the hair was combed.

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For days I studied the sun coruscating
off the taller buildings
that were visible from the elevated train
on my way to work
and I did think I had a better vantage point
from there, that early.
It may have been that "Sunrise Serenade"
was actually written to the tune of the sun rising
or the sun just rises to that tune anyway,
I don't know;
but there is this correlation,
even if it is my own,
and it reminds me,
this tune going through and through and back again still,
of Glenn Miller, turning around on our stereo, Benny
Goodman
and a whole era that only has records
to show for itself
and I begin to think
I would like to give up the words,
the language,
and think in terms of blocks, cubes of space,
smaller ones attached to larger ones
in certain patterns,
some other cadence to form the shapes,
variations perhaps,
facial bone structure, turning angle to angle
from time to time:
to explain things to myself,
a different sense for the same events
without any complications of color.

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other customers in Rinaldi's to overhear. Voice shrill, laughter shrill. Must guard against excitement. ...A true gift, such women possess; "artistic arrangement of life" a phrase I think I read somewhere. Can't remember. She wants to understand me but will not invade me like the others. Sunshine: her hair. (Though it is brown, not very unusual. But always clean.) Sunshine: dispelling of demons. Intimacy always a danger. Intimacy/hell/intimacy/hell. Could possibly make love to her thinking of [redacted] or (say) the boy with the kinky reddish hair on the bicycle...but sickening to think of. What if. What if an attack of laughter. Hysterical giggling. And. Afterward. Such shame, disgust. She would not laugh of course but might be wounded for life: cannot exaggerate the dangers of intimacy, on my side or hers. The Secret between us. My secret, not hers. Our friendship--nearly a year now--on my footing, never hers. Can't deny what others have known before me, the pleasure of secrecy, taking of risks.

--With [redacted] etc. last night, unable to wake this morning till after ten; already at work; sick headache, dryness of mouth, throat. But no fever. Temperature normal. [redacted] so bitter, speaks of having been blackmailed by some idiot, but (in my opinion) it all happened years ago, not connected with his position here in town. Teaches juniors, seniors. Advises Drama Club. Tenure. I'm envious of him & impatient with his continual bitterness. Rehashing of past. What's the point of it? Of course, he is over forty (how much over forty is his secret) and I am a decade younger, [redacted] maybe fifteen years younger. Will never turn into that. Hag's face, lines around mouth, eyes. Grotesque moustache: trying to be 25 years old & misses by a [redacted] mile.... Yet my pen-and-ink portrait of him is endearing. Delighted, that it should please even him. & did not mind the CA$H. Of course I am talented & of course misused at the agency but refuse to be bitter like the others. [redacted] lavish, flattery and money. I deserve both but don't expect everyone to recognize me...in no hurry...can't demand fame overnight. Would I want fame anyway???? Maybe not. With [redacted]'s hundred dollars bought her that $35 book of Toulouse-Lautrec's work, dear Henri, perhaps should not have risked [redacted] it with her but genuinely thought she would like it. Did not think, as usual. She seemed grateful enough, thanking me, surprised, said she'd received only a few cards from home & a predictable present from her mother, certainly did not expect anything from me--"But aren't you saving for a trip to Europe"--remembers so much about me, amazing--so sweet--unlike [redacted] who calls me by the names of strangers and is vile. His image with me till early afternoon, tried to vomit in the first-floor lavatory where no one from the office might drop in, dry heaving gasps, not so easy to do on an empty stomach. Mind over matter?????? Not with "Farrell van Buren"!

--A complete day wasted. Idiotic trendy "collage" for MacKenzie's Diary, if you please. Cherubs, grinning teenagers, trophies. An "avant-garde" look to it. Haha. Looking forward to lay-out for the Hilton & Trader Vic's, at least some precedent to work from and resist. ...Could send out my Invisible Soldiers to hack up a few of these bastards, smart-assed paunchy hags bossing me around. Someday things will be different. (Of course

A manuscript page from a story by Joyce Carol Oates.

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Joyce Carol Oates

The Art of Fiction LXXII

Joyce Carol Oates is the rarest of commodities, an author modest about her work, though there is such a quantity of it that she has three publishers—one for fiction, one for poetry, and a "small press" for more experimental work, limited editions and books her other publishers simply can not schedule.

In the fall of 1978, Ms. Oates and her professor-husband, Raymond Smith, moved from the University of Windsor in Canada, to New Jersey, where she assumed duties as writer-in-residence at Princeton University. Despite the demands of her students and writing, she continues to devote much energy to The Ontario Review, *a literary quarterly which her husband*

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edits and for which she serves as a contributing editor.

Ms. Oates is striking looking, slender with straight dark hair and large, inquiring eyes. A highly attractive woman, she is not photogenic; no photo has ever done justice to her appearance, which conveys grace and high intelligence. If her manner is taken for aloofness—as it sometimes has been—it is, in fact, a shyness which the publication of thirty-three books, the production of three plays, and the winning of the National Book Award for the novel, them, *has not displaced.*

Anyone who has known her for a long time, however, is likely to point out how less shy she is than formerly. As an undergraduate at Syracuse University, where she was valedictorian of a class of over 2,000—receiving an "A" in all subjects but physical education—she was too timid to read her papers aloud when called upon in class. Professors read them for her.

This interview began at the Windsor home in the summer of 1976. When interviewed her speaking voice was, as always, soft and reflective. One receives the impression she never speaks in anything but perfectly-formed sentences. Ms. Oates answered all questions openly, while curled with her Persian cats upon a sofa. (She is a confirmed cat-lover and recently took in two more kittens at the Princeton house.) Talk continued during a stroll by the bank of the Detroit river where she confessed to having sat for hours, watching the horizon, the boats and dreaming her characters into existence. She sets these dreams physically onto paper on a writing table in one corner of the master bedroom.

Additional questions were asked in New York during the 1976 Christmas season when Ms. Oates and her husband attended a seminar on her work which was part of that year's Modern Language Association convention. Many of the questions in this interview were answered via correspondence. She felt only by writing out her replies could she say precisely what she wished to, without possibility of misunderstanding or misquotation.

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INTERVIEWER

We may as well get this one over with first: You're frequently charged with producing too much.

OATES

Productivity is a relative matter. And it's really insignificant: What is ultimately important is a writer's strongest books. It may be the case that we all must write many books in order to achieve a few lasting ones—just as a young writer or poet might have to write hundreds of poems before writing his first significant one. Each book as it is written, however, is a completely absorbing experience, and feels always as if it were *the* work I was born to write. Afterward, of course, as the years pass, it's possible to become more detached, more critical.

I really don't know what to say. I note and can to some extent sympathize with the objurgatory tone of certain critics who feel that I write too much because, quite wrongly, they believe they ought to have read most of my books before attempting to criticize a recently-published one. (At least I *think* that's why they react a bit irritably.) Yet each book is a world unto itself, and must stand alone and it should not matter whether a book is a writer's first, or tenth, or fiftieth.

INTERVIEWER

About your critics—do you read them, usually? Have you ever learned anything from a book review or an essay on your work?

OATES

Sometimes I read reviews, and without exception I will read critical essays that are sent to me. The critical essays are interesting on their own terms. Of course it's a pleasure simply to discover that someone has read and responded to one's work; being understood, and being praised, is beyond expectation most of the time. . . . The average review is a quickly-written piece not meant to be definitive. So it would be misguided for a writer to read such reviews attentively. All writers without

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exception find themselves clapperclawed from time to time; I think the experience (provided one survives it) is wonderfully liberating: After the first death there is no other. . . . A writer who has published as many books as I have, has developed, of necessity, a hide like a rhino's, while inside there dwells a frail, hopeful butterfly of a spirit.

INTERVIEWER

Returning to the matter of your "productivity": Have you ever dictated into a machine?

OATES

No, oddly enough I've written my last several novels in long-hand first. I had an enormous, rather frightening stack of pages and notes for *The Assassins,* probably 800 pages—or was it closer to 1000? It alarms me to remember. *Childwold* needed to be written in long-hand, of course. And now everything finds its initial expression in long-hand and the typewriter has become a rather alien thing—a thing of formality and impersonality. My first novels were all written on a typewriter: first draft straight through, then revisions, then final draft. But I can't do that any longer.

The thought of dictating into a machine doesn't appeal to me at all. Henry James's later works would have been better had he resisted that curious sort of self-indulgence, dictating to a secretary. The roaming garrulousness of ordinary speech is usually corrected when it's transcribed into written prose.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever worry—considering the vast body of your work—if you haven't written a particular scene before, or had characters say the same lines?

OATES

Evidently there are writers (John Cheever, Mavis Gallant come immediately to mind) who never reread their work, and there are others who reread constantly. I suspect I am some-

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where in the middle. If I thought I *had* written a scene before, or written the same lines before, I would simply look it up.

INTERVIEWER

What kind of work schedule do you follow?

OATES

I haven't any formal schedule, but I love to write in the morning before breakfast. Sometimes the writing goes so smoothly that I don't take a break for many hours—and consequently have breakfast at two or three in the afternoon on good days. On school days, days that I teach, I usually write for an hour or forty-five minutes in the morning, before my first class. But I don't have any formal schedule and at the moment I am feeling rather melancholy, or derailed, or simply lost, because I completed a novel some weeks ago and haven't begun another. . . except in scattered, stray notes.

INTERVIEWER

Do you find emotional stability is necessary in order to write? Or can you get to work whatever your state of mind? Is your mood reflected in what you write? How do you describe that perfect state in which you can write from early morning into the afternoon?

OATES

One must be pitiless about this matter of 'mood.' In a sense the writing will *create* the mood. If art is, as I believe it to be, a genuinely transcendental function—a means by which we rise out of limited, parochial states of mind—then it should not matter very much what states of mind or emotion we are in. Generally I've found this to be true: I have forced myself to begin writing when I've been utterly exhausted, when I've felt my soul as thin as a playing-card, when nothing has seemed worth enduring for another five minutes. . . and somehow the activity of writing changes everything. Or appears to do so. Joyce said of the underlying structure of *Ulysses*—the

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Odyssean parallel and parody—that he really didn't care whether it was plausible, so long as it served as a bridge to get his 'soldiers' across. Once they were across, what does it matter if the bridge collapses? One might say the same thing about the use of one's self as a means for the writing to get written. Once the soldiers are across the stream. . . .

INTERVIEWER

What does happen when you finish a novel? Is the next project one that has been waiting in line? Or is the choice more spontaneous?

OATES

When I complete a novel I set it aside, and begin work on short stories, and eventually another long work. When I complete *that* novel I return to the earlier novel and rewrite much of it. In the meantime the second novel lies in a desk drawer. Sometimes I work on two novels simultaneously, though one usually forces the other into the background. The rhythm of writing, revising, writing, revising, etc., seems to suit me. I am inclined to think that as I grow older I will come to be infatuated with the art of revision, and there may come a time when I will dread giving up a novel at all. My next novel, *Unholy Loves,* was written around the time of *Childwold,* for instance, and revised after the completion of that novel, and again revised this past spring and summer. My reputation for writing quickly and effortlessly notwithstanding, I am strongly in favor of intelligent, even fastidious revision, which is, or certainly should be, an art in itself.

INTERVIEWER

Do you keep a diary?

OATES

I began keeping a formal journal several years ago. It resembles a sort of on-going letter to myself, mainly about literary matters. What interests me in the process of my own

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experience is the wide range of my feelings. For instance, after I finish a novel I tend to think of the experience of having written it as being largely pleasant and challenging. But in fact (for I keep careful records) the experience is various: I do suffer temporary bouts of frustration and inertia and depression. There are pages in recent novels that I've rewritten as many as 17 times, and a story, "The Widows," which I revised both before and after publication in *The Hudson Review,* and then revised slightly again before I included it in my next collection of stories—a fastidiousness that could go on into infinity.

Afterward, however, I simply forget. My feelings crystallize (or are mythologized) into something much less complex. All of us who keep journals do so for different reasons I suppose, but we must have in common a fascination with the surprising patterns that emerge over the years—a sort of arabesque in which certain elements appear and reappear, like the designs in a well-wrought novel. The voice of my journal is very much like the one I find myself using in these replies to you: the voice in which I think or meditate when I'm not writing fiction.

INTERVIEWER

Besides writing and teaching, what daily special activities are important to you? Travel, jogging, music? I hear you're an excellent pianist?

OATES

We travel a great deal, usually by car. We've driven slowly across the continent several times, and we've explored the South and New England and of course New York State with loving thoroughness. As a pianist I've defined myself as an "enthusiastic amateur," which is about the most merciful thing that can be said. I like to draw; I like to listen to music, and I spend an inordinate amount of time doing nothing. I don't even think it can be called day-dreaming.

I also enjoy that much-maligned occupation of housewifery, but hardly dare say so, things being what they are today. I like

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to cook, to tend plants, to garden (minimally), to do simple domestic things, to stroll around shopping malls and observe the qualities of people, overhearing snatches of conversations, noting people's appearances, their clothes, and so forth. Walking and driving a car are part of my life as a writer, really. I can't imagine myself apart from these activities.

INTERVIEWER

Despite critical and financial success, you continue to teach. Why?

OATES

I teach a full load at the University of Windsor, which means three courses. One is creative writing, one is the graduate seminar (in the Modern Period), the third is an oversized (115 students) undergraduate course that is lively and stimulating but really too swollen to be satisfying to me. There is, generally, a closeness between students and faculty at Windsor that is very rewarding, however. Anyone who teaches knows that you don't *really* experience a text until you've taught it, in loving detail, with an intelligent and responsive class. At the present time I'm going through Joyce's work with nine graduate students and each seminar meeting is very exciting (and draining) and I can't think, frankly, of anything else I would rather do.

INTERVIEWER

It is a sometimes-publicized fact that your professor-husband does not read most of your work. Is there any practical reason for this?

OATES

Ray has such a busy life of his own, preparing classes, editing *The Ontario Review* and so forth, that he really hasn't time to read my work. I do, occasionally, show him reviews and he makes brief comments on them. I would have liked, I think, to have established an easy-going relationship with some other

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writers, but somehow that never came about. Two or three of us at Windsor do read one another's poems, but criticism as such is minimal. I've never been able to respond very fully to criticism, frankly, because I've usually been absorbed in another work by the time the criticism is available to me. Also, critics sometimes appear to be addressing themselves to works other than those I remember writing.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel in any way an expatriate or an exile, living in Canada?

OATES

We are certainly exiles of a sort. But we would be, I think, exiles if we lived in Detroit as well. Fortunately, Windsor is really an international, cosmopolitan community and our Canadian colleagues are not intensely and narrowly nationalistic.

But I wonder—doesn't everyone feel rather exiled? When I return home to Millerport, New York, and visit nearby Lockport, the extraordinary changes that have taken place make me feel like a stranger; the mere passage of time makes us all exiles. The situation is a comic one, perhaps, since it affirms the power of the evolving community over the individual, but I think we tend to feel it as tragic. Windsor is a relatively stable community, and my husband and I have come to feel, oddly, more at home here than we probably would anywhere else.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever consciously changed your life style to help your work as a writer?

OATES

Not really. My nature is orderly and observant and scrupulous, and deeply introverted, so life wherever I attempt it turns out to be claustral. *Live like the bourgeois,* Flaubert suggested,

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but I was living like that long before I came across Flaubert's remark.

INTERVIEWER

You wrote *Do With Me What You Will* during your year living in London. While there you met many writers such as Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble, Colin Wilson, Iris Murdoch —writers you respect, as your reviews of their work indicates. Would you make any observations on the role of the writer in society in England versus that which you experience here?

OATES

The English novelist is almost without exception an observer of society. (I suppose I mean "society" in its most immediate, limited sense.) Apart from writers like Lawrence (who doesn't seem altogether *English,* in fact) there hasn't been an intense interest in subjectivity, in the psychology of living, breathing human beings. Of course there have been marvelous novels. And there *is* Doris Lessing, who writes books that can no longer be categorized: fictional parable, autobiography, allegory. . . ? And John Fowles. And Iris Murdoch.

But there is a feel to the American novel that is radically different. We are willing to risk being called "formless" by people whose ideas of form are rigidly limited, and we are wilder, more exploratory, more ambitious, perhaps less easily shamed, less easily discouraged. The intellectual life as such we tend to keep out of our novels, fearing the sort of highly readable but ultimately disappointing cerebral quality of Huxley's work. . .or, on a somewhat lower level, C. P. Snow's.

INTERVIEWER

The English edition of *Wonderland* has a different ending from the American. Why? Do you often rewrite published work?

OATES

I was forced to rewrite the ending of that particular novel

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because it struck me that the first ending was not the correct one. I have not rewritten any other published work (except of course for short stories, which sometimes get rewritten before inclusion in a book) and don't intend to if I can possibly help it.

INTERVIEWER

You've written novels on highly specialized fields, such as brain surgery. How do you research such backgrounds?

OATES

A great deal of reading, mainly. Some years ago I developed a few odd symptoms that necessitated my seeing a doctor, and since there was for a time talk of my being sent to a neurologist, I nervously and superstitutiously began reading the relevant journals. What I came upon so chilled me that I must have gotten well as a result. . .

INTERVIEWER

In addition to the novel about medicine, you've written one each on law, politics, religion, spectator sports: Are you consciously filling out a "program" of novels about American life?

OATES

Not really consciously. The great concern with "medicine" really grew out of an experience of some duration that brought me into contact with certain thoughts of mortality: of hospitals, illnesses, doctors, the world of death and dying and our human defenses against such phenomena. (A member of my family to whom I was very close died rather slowly of cancer.) I attempted to deal with my own very inchoate feelings about these matters by dramatizing what I saw to be contemporary responses to "mortality." My effort to wed myself with a fictional character and our synthesis in turn with a larger, almost allegorical conditon resulted in a novel that was difficult to write and also, I suspect, difficult to read.

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A concern with law seemed to spring naturally out of the thinking many of us were doing in the '60s: what is the relationship between "law" and civilization, what hope has civilization without "law," and yet what hope has civilization *with* law as it has developed in our tradition? More personal matters blended with the larger issues of "crime" and "guilt" so that I felt I was able to transcend a purely private and purely local drama that might have had emotional significance for me, but very little beyond that; quite by accident I found myself writing about a woman conditioned to be unnaturally "passive" in a world of hearty masculine combat—an issue that became topical even as the novel *Do With Me What You Will* was published, and is topical still, to some extent.

The "political" novel, *The Assassins,* grew out of two experiences I had some years ago, at high-level conferences involving politicians, academic specialists, lawyers, and a scattering—no, hardly that—of literary people. (I won't be more specific at the moment.) A certain vertiginous fascination with work which I noted in my own nature I was able to objectify (and, I think, exaggerate) in terms of the various characters' fanaticism involving their own "work"—most obviously in Andrew Petrie's obsession with "transforming the consciousness of America." *The Assassins* is about megalomania and its inevitable consequences and it seemed necessary that the assassins be involved in politics, given the peculiar conditions of our era.

The new "religious" novel, *Son of the Morning,* is rather painfully autobiographical, in part; but only in part. The religion it explores is not institutional but rather subjective, intensely personal, so as a novel it is perhaps not like the earlier three I have mentioned, or the racing novel, *With Shuddering Fall.* Rather, *Son of the Morning* is a novel that begins with wide ambitions and ends very, very humbly.

INTERVIEWER

Somewhere in print you called *The Assassins* the favorite of your novels. It received very mixed reviews. I've often thought

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that book was misread. For instance, I think the "martyr" in that novel arranged for his own assassination, true? And that his wife was never really attacked outside the country house; she never left it. Her maiming was all confined within her head.

OATES

What a fine surprise! You read the scene exactly as it was meant to be read. Even well-intentioned reviewers missed the point; so far as I know, only two or three people read Yvonne's scene as I had intended it to be read. Yet the hallucinatory nature of the "dismemberment" scene is explicit. And Andrew Petrie did, of course, arrange for his own assassination, as the novel makes clear in its concluding pages.

The novel has been misread, of course, partly because it's rather long and I think reviewers, who are usually pressed for time, simply treated it in a perfunctory way. I'm not certain that it is my favorite novel. But it is, or was, my most ambitious. It involved a great deal of effort, the collating of passages (and memories) that differ from or contradict one another. One becomes attached to such perverse, maddening ugly ducklings, but I can't realy blame reviewers for being impatient with the novel. As my novels grow in complexity they please me more and please the "literary world" hardly at all—a sad situation, but not a paralyzing one.

INTERVIEWER

It's not merely a matter of complexity. One feels that your fiction has become more and more urgent, more subjective and less concerned with the outward details of this world—especially in *Childwold.* Was that novel a deliberate attempt to write a "poetic novel"? Or is it a long poem?

OATES

I don't see that *Childwold* is not concerned with the outward details of the world. In fact it's made up almost entirely of visual details—of the natural world, of the farm the Bart-

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letts own, and of the small city they gravitate to. But you are right, certainly, in suggesting that it is a "poetic novel." I had wanted to create a prose poem in the form of a novel, or a novel in the form of a prose poem: the exciting thing for me was to deal with the tension that arose between the image-centered structure of poetry and the narrative-centered and linear structure of the interplay of persons that constitutes a novel. In other words, poetry focuses upon the image, the particular thing, or emotion, or feeling; while prose fiction focuses upon motion through time and space. The one impulse is toward stasis, the other toward movement. Between the two impulses there arose a certain tension that made the writing of the novel quite challenging. I suppose it is an experimental work but I shy away from thinking of my work in those terms: it seems to me there is a certain self-consciousness about anyone who sets himself up as an 'experimental' writer. All writing is experimental.

But experimentation for its own sake doesn't much interest me; it seems to belong to the early '60's, when Dadaism was being rediscovered. In a sense we are all post-*Wake* writers and it's Joyce, and only Joyce, who casts a long terrifying shadow. . . . The problem is that virtuoso writing appeals to the intellect and tends to leave one's emotions untouched. When I read aloud to my students the last few pages of *Finnegan's Wake,* and come to that glorious, and heart-breaking, final section ("But you're changing, acoolsha, you're changing from me, I can feel.") I think I'm able to communicate the almost overwhelmingly beautiful emotion behind it, and the experience certainly leaves *me* shaken, but it would be foolish to think that the average reader, even the average intelligent reader, would be willing to labor at the *Wake,* through those hundreds of dense pages, in order to attain an emotional and spiritual sense of the work's wholeness, as well as its genius. Joyce's *Ulysses* appeals to me more: that graceful synthesis of the "naturalistic" and the "symbolic" suits my temperament also. . . . I try to write books that can be read in one way by a literal-minded reader, and in quite another way by a reader

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alert to symbolic abbreviation and parodistic elements. And yet, it's the same book—or nearly. A trompe l'oeil, a work of *as if.*

INTERVIEWER

Very little has been made of the humor in your work, the parody. Some of your books, like *Expensive People, The Hungry Ghosts,* and parts of *Wonderland* seem almost Pinteresque in their absurd humor. Is Pinter an influence? Do you consider yourself a Comedic writer?

OATES

There's been humor of a sort in my writing from the first; but it's understated, or deadpan. Pinter has never struck me as very funny. Doesn't he really write tragedy?

I liked Ionesco at one time. And Kafka. And Dickens (from whom Kafka learned certain effects, though he uses them, of course, for different ends). I respond to English satire, as I mentioned earlier. Absurdist or "dark" or "black" or whatever: what isn't tragic belongs to the comic spirit. The novel is nourished by both and swallows both up greedily.

INTERVIEWER

What have you learned from Kafka?

OATES

To make a jest of the horror. To take myself less seriously.

INTERVIEWER

John Updike has been accused of a lack of violence in his work. You're often accused of portraying too much. What is the function of violence in your work?

OATES

Given the number of pages I have written, and the "violent" incidents dispersed throughout them, I rather

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doubt that I am a violent writer in any meaningful sense of the word. Certainly the violence is minimal in a novel like *Them,* which purported to be a naturalistic work set in Detroit in the '60's; real life is much more chaotic.

INTERVIEWER

Which of your books gave you the greatest trouble to write? And which gave the greatest pleasure or pride.

OATES

Both *Wonderland* and *The Assassins* were difficult to write. *Expensive People* was the least difficult. I am personally very fond of *Childwold* since it represents, in a kind of diffracted way, a complete world made of memory and imagination, a blending-together of different times. It always surprises me that other people find that novel admirable because, to me, it seems very private. . . the sort of thing a writer can do only once.

Aside from that, *Do With Me What You Will* gives me a fair amount of pleasure, and of course, I am closest to the novel I finished most recently, *Son of the Morning.* (In general I think we are always fondest of the books we've just completed, aren't we? For obvious reasons.) But then I think of Jules and Maureen and Loretta of *them* and I wonder if perhaps that isn't my favorite novel, after all.

INTERVIEWER

For whom do you write—yourself, your friends, your "public"? Do you imagine an ideal reader for your work?

OATES

Well, there are certain stories, like those in *The Hungry Ghosts,* which I have written for an academic community and, in some cases, for specific people. But in general the writing writes itself—I mean a character determines his or her "voice" and I must follow along. Had I my own way the first section of *The Assassins* would be much abbreviated. But it was impos-

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sible to shut Hugh Petrie up once he got going and, long and painful and unwieldy as his section is, it's nevertheless been shortened. The problem with creating such highly conscious and intuitive characters is that they tend to perceive the contours of the literary landscape in which they dwell and, like Kasch of *Childwold,* try to guide or even to take over the direction of the narrative. Hugh did not want to die, and so his section went on and on, and it isn't an exaggeraton to say that I felt real dismay in dealing with him.

Son of the Morning is a first-person narration by a man who is addressing himself throughout to God. Hence the whole novel is a prayer. Hence the ideal reader is, then, God. Everyone else, myself included, is secondary.

INTERVIEWER

Do you consider yourself religious? Do you feel there is a firm religious basis to your work?

OATES

I wish I knew how to answer this. Having completed a novel that is saturated with what Jung calls the God-experience, I find that I know less than ever about myself and my own beliefs. I have beliefs, of course, like everyone—but I don't always believe in them. Faith comes and goes. God diffracts into a bewildering plenitude of elements—the environment, love, friends and family, career, profession, "fate," biochemical harmony or disharmony, whether the sky is slate-gray or a bright mesmerizing blue. These elements then coalesce again into something seemingly unified. But it's a human predilection, isn't it?—our tendency to see, and to wish to see, what we've projected outward upon the universe from our own souls? I hope to continue to write about religious experience, but at the moment I feel quite drained, quite depleted. And as baffled as ever.

INTERVIEWER

You mention Jung. Is Freud also an influence? Laing?

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OATES

Freud I have always found rather limited and biased; Jung and Laing I've read only in recent years. As an undergraduate at Syracuse University I discovered Nietzsche and it may be the Nietzschean influence (which is certainly far more provocative than Freud's) that characterizes some of my work. I don't really know, consciously. For me, stories usually begin—or began, since I write so few of them now—out of some magical association between characters and their settings. There are some stories (I won't say which ones) which evolved almost entirely out of their settings, usually rural.

INTERVIEWER

Your earliest stories and novels seem influenced by Faulkner and by Flannery O'Connor. Are these influences you acknowledge? Are there others?

OATES

I've been reading for so many years, and my influences must be so vast—it would be very difficult to answer. An influence I rarely mention is Thoreau, whom I read at a very impressionable age, (my early teens), and Henry James, O'Connor and Faulkner, certainly, Katherine Anne Porter, and Dostoyevsky. An odd mixture.

INTERVIEWER

The title *Wonderland,* and frequent other allusions in your work, point toward a knowledge of, if not an affinity for, Lewis Carroll. What is the connection, and is it an important one?

OATES

Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-glass* were my very first books. Carroll's wonderful blend of illogic and humor and horror and justice has always appealed to me, and I had a marvelous time teaching the books last year in my undergraduate course.

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INTERVIEWER

Was there anything you were particularly afraid of, as a child?

OATES

Like most children, I was probably afraid of a variety of things. The unknown? The possibility of those queer fortuitous metamorphoses that seem to overtake certain of Carroll's characters? Physical pain? Getting lost? . . . My proclivity for the irreverent and the nonsensical was either inspired by Carroll, or confirmed by him. I was always, and continue to be, an essentially mischievous child. This is one of my best-kept secrets.

INTERVIEWER

You began writing at a very early age. Was it encouraged by your family? Was yours a family of artistic ambitions?

OATES

In later years my parents have become "artistic," but when they were younger, and their children were younger, they had no time for anything much except work. I was always encouraged by my parents, my grandmother, and my teachers, to be creative. I can't remember when I first began to tell stories—by drawing, it was then—but I must have been very young. It was an instinct I followed quite naturally.

INTERVIEWER

Much of your work is set in the 1930s, a period during which you were merely an infant at best. Why is that decade so important to your work or vision?

OATES

Since I was born in 1938, the decade is of great significance to me. This was the world of my parents, who were young adults at the time, the world I was born into. The '30s seem in an odd way still "living" to me, partly in terms of my parents'

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and grandparents' memories, and partly in terms of its treatment in books and films. But the '20s is too remote—lost to me entirely! I simply haven't had the imaginative power to get that far back.

I identify very closely with my parents in ways I can't satisfactorily explain. The lives they lived before I was born seem somehow accessible to me. Not directly, of course, but imaginatively. A memory belonging to my mother or father seems almost to "belong" to me. In studying old photographs I am struck sometimes by a sense of my being contemporary with my parents—as if I'd known them when they were, let's say, only teenagers. Is this odd? I wonder. I rather suspect others share in their family's experiences and memories without knowing quite how.

INTERVIEWER

When we were undergraduates together at Syracuse, you already were something of a legend. It was rumored you'd finish a novel, turn it over, and immediately begin writing another on the backside. When both sides were covered, you'd throw it all out, and reach for clean paper. Was it at Syracuse you first became aware you were going to be a writer?

OATES

I began writing in high school, consciously training myself by writing novel after novel and always throwing them out when I completed them. I remember a 300-page book of interrelated stories that must have been modeled on Hemingway's *In Our Time* (I hadn't yet read *Dubliners,*) though the subject matter was much more romantic than Hemingway's. I remember a bloated trifurcated novel that had as its vague model *The Sound and the Fury*. . .Fortunately these experiments were thrown away and I haven't remembered them until this moment.

Syracuse was a very exciting place academically and intellectually for me. I doubt that I missed more than half a dozen classes in my four years there; and none of them in English.

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INTERVIEWER

I remember you were in a sorority. It is incredible to contemplate you as "a sorority girl."

OATES

My experience in a sorority wasn't disastrous, but merely despairing. (I tried to resign but found out that upon joining I had signed some sort of legal contract.) However, I did make some close friends in the sorority, so the experience wasn't a total loss. I would never do it again, certainly. In fact, it's one of the three or four things in my entire life I would never do again.

INTERVIEWER

Why was life in a Syracuse sorority so despairing? Have you written about it?

OATES

The racial and religious bigotry; the asininity of 'secret ceremonies'; the moronic emphasis upon 'activities' totally unrelated to—in fact antithetical to—intellectual exploration; the bullying of the presumably weak by the presumably strong; the deliberate pursuit of an attractive 'image' for the group as a whole, no matter how cynical the individuals might have been; the aping of the worst American traits—boosterism, God-fearing-ism, smug ignorance, a craven worship of conformity; the sheer *mess* of the place once one got beyond the downstairs. . . . I tried to escape in my junior year but a connection between sororities and the Dean of Women and the university housing office made escape all but impossible, and it seemed that, in my freshman naïveté, I had actually signed some sort of contract that had 'legal' status. . . all of which quite cowed me. I remember a powdered and perfumed alum explaining the sorority's exclusion of Jews and blacks: "You see, we have conferences at the Lake Placid Club, and wouldn't it be a shame if *all* our members couldn't attend. . . . Why, it would be embarrassing for them, wouldn't it?"

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I was valedictorian of my class, the class of 1960. I fantasized beginning my address by saying: "I managed to do well academically at Syracuse despite the concerted efforts of my sorority to prevent me. . . ."

I haven't written about it, and never will. It's simply too stupid and trivial a subject. To even *care* about such adolescent nonsense one would have to have the sensitivity of a John O'Hara, who seems to have taken it all seriously.

INTERVIEWER

I recall you won the poetry contest at Syracuse in your senior year. But your books of poetry appeared relatively later than your fiction. Were you always writing poetry?

OATES

No, I really began to write poetry later. The poetry still comes with difficulty, I must admit. Tiny lyric asides, droll wry enigmatic statements: they aren't easy, are they? I'm assembling a book which I think will be my last—of poems, I mean. No one wants to read a novelist's poetry. It's enough—too much, in fact—to deal with the novels. Strangely enough my fellow poets have been magnanimous indeed in accepting me as a poet. I would not have been surprised had they ignored me, but, in fact, they've been wonderfully supportive and encouraging. Which contradicts the general notion that poets are highly competitive and jealous of one another's accomplishments. . .

INTERVIEWER

You say no one wants to read a novelist's poetry. What about Robert Penn Warren? John Updike? Erica Jong? I suppose Allen Tate and James Dickey are poets who happened to write novels. . .

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OATES

I suppose I was thinking only of hypothetical reactions to my own poetry. Robert Penn Warren aside, however, there *is* a tendency on the part of critics to want very much to categorize writers. Hence one is either a writer of prose or of poetry. If Lawrence hadn't written those novels he would have been far more readily acclaimed as one of the greatest poets in the language. As it is, however, his poetry has been neglected. (At least until recently.)

INTERVIEWER

By the North Gate, your first book, is a collection of short stories, and you continue to publish them. Is the short story your greatest love? Do you hold with the old adage that it is more difficult to write a good story than a novel?

OATES

Brief subjects require brief treatments. There is *nothing* so difficult as a novel, as anyone knows who has attempted one; a short story is bliss to write set beside a novel of even ordinary proportions.

But in recent years I haven't been writing much short fiction. I don't quite know why. All my energies seem to be drawn into longer works. It's probably the case that my period of greatest productivity is behind me, and I'm becoming more interested in focussing upon a single work, usually a novel, and trying to "perfect" it section by section and page by page.

INTERVIEWER

Nevertheless, you've published more short stories, perhaps, than any other serious writer in America today. I remember that when you chose the 21 stories to compose *The Wheel of Love,* you picked from some ninety which had been in magazines the two years since your previous collection. What will become of the seventy or so stories you didn't include in that collection? Were some added to later collections? Will you ever get back and pick-up uncollected work?

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OATES

If I'm serious about a story I preserve it in book form; otherwise I intend it to be forgotten. This is true of course for poems and reviews and essays as well. I went back and selected a number of stories that for thematic reasons were not included in *The Wheel of Love,* and put them into a collection called *The Seduction* and other stories. Each of the story collections is organized around a central theme and is meant to be read as a whole—the arrangement of the stories being a rigorous one, not at all haphazard.

INTERVIEWER

You don't drink. Have you tried any consciousness-expanding drugs?

OATES

No. Even tea (because of caffeine) is too strong for me. I must have been born with a rather sensitive constitution.

INTERVIEWER

Earlier you mentioned Hugh Petrie in *The Assassins.* He is but one of many deranged characters in your books. Have you known any genuine madmen?

OATES

Unfortunately, I have been acquainted with a small number of persons who might be considered mentally disturbed. And others, strangers, are sometimes drawn my way; I don't know why.

Last week when I went to the university, I wasn't allowed to teach my large lecture class because, during the night, one of my graduate students had received a telephone call from a very angry, distraught man who announced that he intended to kill me. So I had to spend several hours sequestered away with the head of our department and the head of security at the university and two special investigators from the Windsor City Police. The situation was more embarrassing than disturbing. It's the

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first time anyone has so explicitly and publicly threatened my life—there have been sly, indirect threats made in the past, which I've known enough not to take seriously.

(The man who called my student is a stranger to us all, not even a resident of Windsor. I have no idea why he's so angry with me. But does a disturbed person really need a reason. . . ?)

INTERVIEWER

How about the less threatening, but nonetheless hurtful, reactions of friends and relatives—any reactions to conscious or unconscious portraits in your work?

OATES

My parents (and I, as a child) appear very briefly in *Wonderland,* glimpsed by the harassed young hero on his way to, or from, Buffalo. Otherwise there are no portraits of family or relatives in my writing. My mother and father both respond, (rather touchingly at times), to the setting of my stories and novels, which they recognize. But since there is nothing of a personal nature in the writing, I have not experienced any difficulties along those lines.

INTERVIEWER

Aside from the singular incident at the university, what are the disadvantages of being famous?

OATES

I'm not aware of being famous, especially here in Windsor, where the two major bookstores, Coles', don't even stock my books. The number of people who are 'aware' of me, let alone who read my writing, is very small. Consequently I enjoy a certain degree of invisibility and anonymity at the university, which I might not have at an American university—which is one of the reasons I am so much at home here.

INTERVIEWER

Are you aware of any personal limitations?

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OATES

Shyness has prevented me from doing many things; also the amount of work and responsibility here at Windsor.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel you have any conspicious or secret flaw as a writer?

OATES

My most conspicious flaw is. . . well, it's so conspicuous that anyone could discern it. And my secret flaw is happily secret.

INTERVIEWER

What are the advantages of being a woman writer?

OATES

Advantages! Too many to enumerate, probably. Since, being a woman, I can't be taken altogether *seriously* by the sort of male critics who rank writers 1, 2, 3 in the public press, I am free, I suppose to do as I like. I haven't much sense of, or interest in, competition; I can't even grasp what Hemingway and the epigonic Mailer mean by battling it out with the other talent in the ring. A work of art has never, to my knowledge, displaced another work of art. The living are no more in competition with the dead then they are with the living. . . . Being a woman allows me a certain invisibility. Like Ellison's *Invisible Man.* (My long journal, which must be several hundred pages by now, has the title *Invisible Woman.* Because a woman, being so mechanically judged by her appearance, has the advantage of hiding within it—of being absolutely whatever she knows herself to be, in contrast with what others imagine her to be. I feel no connection at all with my physical appearance and have often wondered whether this was a freedom any man—writer or not—might enjoy.)

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INTERVIEWER

Do you find it difficult to write from the point of view of the male?

OATES

Absolutely not. I am as sympathetic with any of my male characters as I am with any of my female characters. In many respects I am closest in temperament to certain of my male characters—Nathan Vickery of *Son of the Morning,* for instance—and feel an absolute kinship with them. "The Kingdom of God *is* within."

INTERVIEWER

Can you tell the sex of a writer from the prose.

OATES

Never.

INTERVIEWER

What male writers have been especially effective, do you think, in their depiction of women?

OATES

Tolstoy, Lawrence, Shakespeare, Flaubert. . . . Very few, really. But then very few women have been effective in their depiction of men.

INTERVIEWER

Do you enjoy writing?

OATES

I do enjoy writing, yes. A great deal. And I feel somewhat at a loss, aimless and foolishly sentimental, and disconnected, when I've finished one work and haven't yet become absorbed in another. All of us who write work out of a convicton that we are participating in some sort of communal activity. Whether my role is writing, or reading and responding, might not be

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very important. I take seriously Flaubert's statement that we must love one another in our art as the mystics love one another in God. By honoring one another's creation we honor something that deeply connects us all, and goes beyond us.

Of course writing is only one activity out of a vast number of activities that constitute our lives. It seems to be the one that some of us have concentrated on, as if we were fated for it. Since I have a great deal of faith in the processes and the wisdom of the unconscious, and have learned from experience to take lightly the judgements of the ego, and its inevitable doubts, I never find myself constrained to answer such questions. Life is energy, and energy is creativity. And even when we as individuals pass on, the energy is retained in the work of art, locked in it and awaiting release if only someone will take the time and the care to unlock it. . .

Robert Phillips

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Dr. Justino Ybarra, Dispeller Of Blindness

(Hommage à Borges & Singer)

Ray Russell

"And we have removed from thee thy veil; and thy sight today is piercing."
The Koran

The treacherous nature of human language is shown with admonitory force in an incident well known, if not fully understood, among the people of this part of the hemisphere in which I spend my days. In the capitol of one of those countries bordering on mine, during the rule of the present dictator's infamous uncle, there was erected a spacious and elegant clinic, all of white marble, modelled chiefly after the Alhambra, but with disquieting influences of Versailles and Stonehenge. Birds of colorful plumage nested in the intricacy of its crenellation. The director of this clinic was no mere bureaucrat (notwithstanding the fact that he was the brother-in-law of the abhorred despot), but a gifted and saintly man, a great healer, in fact: Dr. Justino Ybarra, son of that remarkable General Enrique Ybarra, who ordered his starving troops to eat each other rather than slaughter their steeds, "who are far nobler beings than you filthy rabble." Much calumny has been said and sung about Dr. Ybarra, in particular a heartless and unfounded ditty one may hear bawled by urchins in the streets

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of that city even today:

Ybarra makes the blind to talk,
(Ay! Ay! Caramba!)
The lame to see, the dumb to walk.
(Ay! Ay! Caramba!)

It is partly to dispel this blindness about the dispeller of blindness that I, or a reasonably resemblant homunculus of myself (if even I, indeed, can be said to be myself), have, Allah protect the syntax, chosen to set down these words.

There had been admitted to the clinic a white-bearded, black-clad traveller from a far-off land, one Avram Schmoyleh, an Chassidic rabbi and scholar whom it had pleased God to have stricken sightless in his fiftieth year, while he was poring over the sacred books. His wife, Yetzele, who had red hair and glittering eyes, and took a back seat to no one when it came to cooking matzobrei but who was a complete shlep at latke and kreplach, had no use for a blind husband, so she ran off with an oily-haired tailor from a nearby shtetl. His name was Mitkis and his body odor was strong enough to derail a train. It may have done so: the adulterous two were killed the following week in an accident on the Warsaw-Lwow line. "God is just," Avram was heard to say on that occasion.

For a quarter of a century, Reb Avram had wandered, to this land and that, from one physician to another, all to no avail, until, at the time of my tale, aged seventy-five and shockingly infirm, he had arrived at the famous clinic. Having no Spanish, he addressed Dr. Ybarra in the only tongue common to both of them (Frisian): "Before I die," he said, "it is my wish to read the Talmud with my own eyes."

The doctor gently responded, in that same recondite language, "But, my dear sir, surely you have, for many a year prior to your lamentable blindness, pored over the sacred writings?"

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"Pored over them, yes," replied the rabbi, "but now I'd like to *read* them."

"You will, you will, holy man, I swear it," said the doctor, adding: "An Ybarra does not swear such an oath lightly." The fire of Iberian ancestors flared in his smoky eyes.

Thus, Hope, that bright daemon in angel's vestments, lifted Reb Avram to the heights. It sustained him through the delicate and complex surgery performed by Dr. Ybarra. It nurtured him through the long weeks of convalescence when his eyes were wrapped in the thick opacity of infinite bandages. Not unnaturally, the words of Genesis came often to his mind: "Let there be light," although not, it need hardly be said, in the King James Version it has amused me to employ in this recounting.

At last, the great day of the unwrapping dawned, hot and oppressively humid, due to the city's equatorial proximity. Dr. Ybarra, whistling a tune, strode confidently into the rabbi's room and gave the old man an encouraging pat on the shoulder. Reb Avram trembled with apprehension. His heart pounded. What if the operation should prove to have been a failure? What if the renowned Dr. Justino Ybarra should turn out to be nothing more nor less than a schlemiel? What if Yetzele and Mitkis had survived the train wreck? He feared he could not endure disappointment of such magnitude.

Slowly and carefully, Dr. Ybarra began to unwind the first of many layers of bandages from the rabbi's eyes. As he did so, he turned to his nurse with a smile and emphatically said, "Today he sees!"

At those words, Reb Avram was horrified. He delivered himself of a deep, anguished cry of woe and slumped over, dead, his eyes still sealed in that domino of gauze.

Dr. Ybarra was crushed and bewildered. He became morose and had a nervous breakdown. He refused nourishment. He took to the bottle. He went unshaven and wore exotic hats. Dogs barked at him. His reputation suffered. The clinic fell into desuetude, was forced to close, and at length reopened as an army surplus store, the first of its kind.

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For the rest of his life, Dr. Justino Ybarra lived in a fog of doubt and despond. The reason for the rabbi's sudden demise was never revealed to him in this world. Perhaps in the next world it was given to him to know that when he spoke those Spanish words to his nurse—"*¡Hoy ve*!"—Reb Avram, mistaking them for a Yiddish expression of profound dismay, incorrectly assumed all hope was lost and gave up the ghost in despair, demonstrating what I have long averred, that language is a deadly double-edged sword, best left (like Chassidic studies and ophthalmology) to specialized practitioners.

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NOTICE

To accompany Norman Glass' essay on Alfred Chester in *The Paris Review No.71,* a photograph was published of a large number of literary people (including Mr. Chester) grouped outside the Cafe de Tournon which many of them used to frequent. The undersigned was unable to indentify two of the people in the photograph. He has been chided by Eugene Walter (who is also in the photograph) for not inquiring of *him* who these two mysterious figures might be. Mr. Walter (to get that matter out of the way first) is a *Paris Review* editor who has for many years represented the magazine in Rome, combining this with an active literary and movie career. In a letter he identifies the two in the photograph as Michel van der Plats from the Dutch publication *Het Vaderland* (the blond smiling in the middle of the picture), and the Rubenesque lady standing beside Niccolo Tucci as "Gloria the Beautiful Cloak Model." He goes on to say about her, "She appeared for one week (luscious and eminently bitable) in her cloaks, causing Tucci (and others) to pant heavily." There was some additional material in the letter about Mr. Walter himself: "Why you identify me as a writer of short stories, when that is the form I write least in, I Simply Do Not Know. I've done 5 volumes of poetry, 2 novels and parts of 3 others, and various other volumes, as well as reams of profiles, impressions, etc. for publications in 17 countries. My opera buffa, Funnybone, just had its first performance, with cast of 127 and most delightful tunes by the Italo-Amer. composer, Alfred di Rocco. I've been making one film after another; there is a director who falls out laughing to see me fall and writes me a falling part in every single thing he does; last week (in Padua with Monica Vitti) was laser-gunned by a Martian. I thrive on it." Our congratulations to Mr. Walter, and apologies to Michel van der Plats and Gloria the Beautiful Cloak Model for not including them the first time around.

G.A.P.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

Max Apple is the author of *The Oranging of America and Other Stories* (1976) and *Zip* (1978). His daughter **Jessica** is five years old.

Raymond Federman is a bi-lingual novelist, poet and critic. He teaches in the English Department of the State University of New York at Buffalo. His first novel, *Double or Nothing* (Swallow Press) won the Francis Steloff Fiction Prize in 1971.

Eugene K. Garber is Director of the Creative Writing at SUNY—Buffalo. His stories have appeared in *The Sewanee Review* and *Antaeus.*

Barbara Grossman works in publishing in New York.

Pati Hill has published several books, three of them by the Kornblee Gallery in New York. She will have two shows of her photo-copied work this year at the Franklin Furnace and the Kornblee Gallery in New York.

Ray Russell is the author of three novels. He is the winner of the Sri Chinmoy Poetry Awards Statuette for 1977. This is his fifth story to appear in *The Paris Review.*

Alexander Theroux is writer-in-residence at Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass. David Godine has published a number of his books.

POETRY

Ai's second book of poems, *Killing Floor,* will be published by Houghton Mifflin in 1979.

Vicente Aleixandre won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1977. The work presented here will be included in a volume of selected poems to be published by Harper & Row. **Lewis Hyde**, who is editing the selection, is a poet and critic who lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Jason Bell's first collection, *The Plankton and the Stars,* was published by Alderman Press in 1977. He lives in Esmont, Virginia.

Christopher Bursk's first book, *Keeping Watch,* the sixth selection in the Houghton Mifflin New Poetry Series, will be published this fall. He teaches at Bucks Country Community College in Pennsylvania.

Bartolo Cattafi was born in Sicily in 1922, and now lives in Milan, where he works in industry. His translator **Lawrence R. Smith** teaches at Eastern Michigan University.

Patricia Hampl is poet in residence at the University of Minnesota.

Lawrence Kearney received a Massachusetts Arts & Humanities Fund Fellowship for 1978-9. His work has appeared widely in national magazines.

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Lynne Lawner has published two books of poems, *Wedding Night of a Nun* and *Triangle Dream*. She has recently moved to New York from Rome.

Thomas Lux teaches at Sarah Lawrence College and is the author of several collections of poems. He has recently been translating the work of Dino Campana.

Thomas McCarthy's first book *The First Convention* won the 1977 Patrick Kavanagh Award in Ireland, and has recently been published by the Dolmen Press in Dublin. He lives in Cappoquin, County Waterford.

Thomas Masiello's first book, *Fulcrum of Vision*, with introduction by John Ashbery, has been published by New Earth Books.

Julia Mishkin is currently living and working at the Cummington Community for the Arts in Massachusetts. Her poems have recently appeared in *The Nation, Poetry Northwest* and *Poetry Now*.

Sharon Olds' poems have recently appeared in *Prairie Schooner* and *The Mississippi Review*. She received a 1978 CAPS grant in poetry.

Jay Parini teaches at Dartmouth College, where he is co-editor of the new *New England Review*.

Peggy Rizza is a graduate student in Church History at Harvard University.

Elizabeth Spires' work has appeared in *The New Yorker, American Review, Antaeus*, and elsewhere. She is completing her first book of poems.

Gerald Stern's *Lucky Life* (Houghton Mifflin) was the 1977 Lamont Poetry Selection of the Academy of American Poets, and was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award in Poetry. He is teaching this fall at the University of Pittsburgh.

Arthur Vogelsang has recently published work in *Antaeus, Iowa Review* and *Partisan Review*. He is an editor of the *American Poetry Review*.

James L. White recently won a Bush Foundation award. He lives in Minneapolis.

Charles Wright's most recent book is *China Trace* (Wesleyan University Press). His translation of Eugenio Montale's *La Bufera e Altro* will soon be published. He is teaching at Princeton this fall.

INTERVIEWERS

Linda Kuehl, an authority on Jazz, published book reviews and interviews in the *New York Times Book Review, Saturday Review* and *Playboy*. Her interview with Eudora Welty ran in issue No. 55 of *The Paris Review*. She was at work on a biography of Billie Holiday when she died in 1977 at the age of 38.

Barbara Milton lives in New York. At present she is working on a novel and looking for an apartment (poss. coop); 4 rooms, beaut vu, terr, light 60's or 70's; Reas.

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Robert Phillips' most recent book is *The Pregnant Man*, a volume of poetry published this year by Doubleday. His poems and fiction have appeared widely. His interview with William Goyen appeared in issue No. 68.

ART

Nicholas Africano graduated from Illinois State University and went on to receive an M.A. and an M.F.A. in painting there. He is represented by the Holly Solomon Gallery in New York City.

Lois Lane holds degrees from the Philadelphia College of Art and the Yale University School of Art and Architecture. She has been included in a number of group exhibitions and has had one woman shows at Artist's Space and Willard Gallery in New York.

Robert Moskowitz was born in New York City in 1935 and studied at the Pratt Institute. He has had numerous one-man shows, a recent one at the Institute for Art and Urban Resources in New York City and has also been included in many group exhibitions.

Alexis Smith has had one woman shows at the Whitney Museum of American Art. She is represented by the Holly Solomon Gallery in New York.

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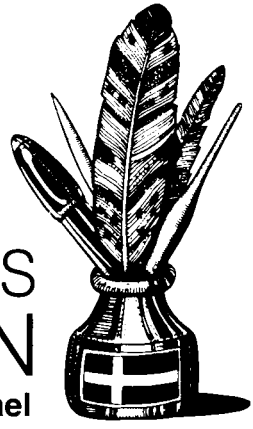

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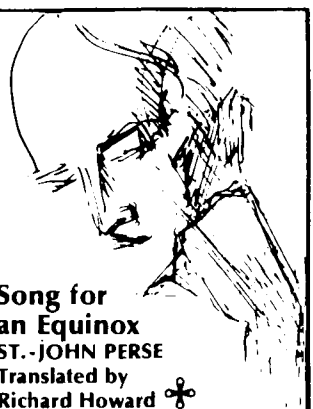

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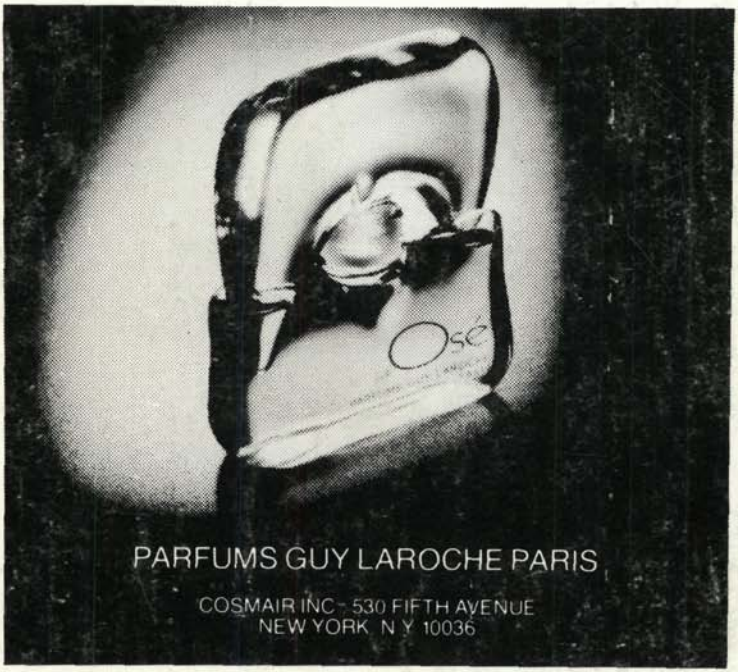

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